

A TOUCH OF

FOR EVER





A TOUCH OF FOREVER

a FOREVER KNIGHT zine

from

DARK ANGEL PRODUCTIONS

Denysé M. Bridger
85 Lakecrest Drive
Dartmouth, Nova Scotia
Canada B2X 1V4

Published By

Bill Hupe & Peg Kennedy
Footrot Flats
916 Lamb Road
Mason, MI
U.S.A. 48854-9445

For: *NIGEL*

Always ...

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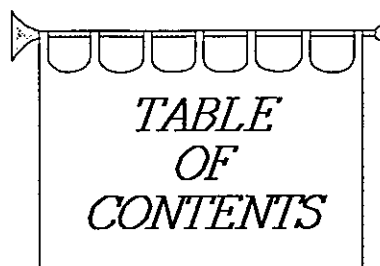


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COMMON GROUND

by: *Marg Baskin*

The faded, black-and-white images on the television screen held about half of Tracy Vetter's attention. This was the first time she'd seen *Casablanca*, but it was a classic, peppered with scenes and lines that were part of popular culture, and the artificial sense of familiarity robbed it of interest. That discovery was quite a disappointment. When she'd noticed it in the *TV Guide*, and invited Vachon to watch it with her, she'd hoped to find something they could share.

Actually, she'd hoped to find an interest she could *learn* to share with him. Her current knowledge of film noir was minimal. She hadn't even recognized the "street talk" Vachon had pulled on her while pretending to be her snitch for the cameras of *The Jerry Show*. In fact she had assumed his commentary on birds and fat men was nothing more than meaningless babble until Nick Knight broke up laughing when he'd seen the videotape and explained it to her.

The bird's on its way to Cairo. Yeah, right. She was giving Vachon the benefit of the doubt, assuming he'd expected her to share the joke.

"I'm still disappointed he never says 'Play it again, Sam'," she complained, deadpan. When Vachon glanced up at her, the term "Philistine" written clearly on his expressive face, she snickered. "Oh, of course I knew that isn't the real line. It's one of those trick questions they put on trivia quizzes, along with 'which Shakespearian play contains the line *Alas, poor Yorick, I knew him well.*' And of course the answer is 'none of them' because it's a misquote."

Her companion had sunk back into the trials and tribulations of Rick and Ilsa, and wasn't listening. Gazing down at the back of his dark head, Tracy decided that was pretty amusing in itself. Dressed in the height of Salvation Army fashion, with a flyway mop of hair that trailed below his shoulders, Javier Vachon just didn't look like someone to be interested by fifty-year-old film classics.

Of course, it was entirely possible he'd first seen the film fifty years ago, when it was brand new, and he looked exactly the same age he did now.

It's Friday night, and you're sitting home in your apartment, watching film noir with a four-hundred-eighty-five-year-old vampire who looks like he ought to play backup for Nirvana. Yes, Tracy Vetter, this is your life. And, frankly, she was enjoying it enormously.

She wrapped her arms more tightly around the pillow that supported her in her favorite posture for watching TV--on her stomach, sprawled diagonally across her bed. Vachon had taken up residence on the floor between her and the set, using the edge of the mattress to prop up his back. The whole scene was casually domestic and strangely intimate, though as soon as she had the latter thought, Tracy realized it was an odd choice of terms. Romantically speaking,

the two of them had never gotten farther than a single, tentative kiss. Maybe they never would, since Vachon seemed every bit as allergic to the term "relationship" as he was to sunlight and solid food. Still, it was a *comfortable* way to spend a rainy autumn evening, and given who and what he was, that was about as surreal as things could get.

Vachon slouched a little lower, until his head was almost level with the edge of the bed. His restless, almost continual movements had spread out his long mane until it formed an ebony fan on the antique, ecru lace of her grandmother's bedspread. Absently, Tracy ran her fingers through the unruly tangles, perfecting the symmetry of the design. The soft texture of his hair surprised her almost as much as her own comfort with the gesture.

I think this could be the start of a beautiful friendship, Tracy silently misquoted Bogart, as he and Claude Rains watched Ilsa's plane taxi away into the foggy North African night.

The film faded into a commercial for some telephone sex line, and Vachon pushed himself upright, ruining the pattern of dark silk on the bedspread. Announcing, "After all these years, it's still a bummer," he began to hunt for the TV remote. Unwilling to test whether fangs and a liquid diet destroyed the link between testosterone and channel surfing, Tracy moved it farther out of his sight.

"It's a very uplifting ending," she protested. "They each made the honorable choice. They sacrificed their love for each other and their chance at personal happiness for a greater cause."

Vachon's cheery, falsely boyish face hardened with uncharacteristic cynicism. "Let me tell you something about greater causes, Trace. They take everything you have, and they give you back ashes."

That flash of seriousness was gone as swiftly as it had come, replaced by gleeful triumph as he spotted the remote around Tracy's torso and the pillow. He made a dive for it--the movement confined to human speed to give her a fair chance--and she almost managed to retain possession of it. Vachon's expression was smug and normal again by the time the brief wrestling match ended with him back on the floor, proving the validity of her fears by planting his thumb on the SCAN button and starting a cycle through each and every one of the fifty-plus channels Rogers Cable had to offer.

Trying to ignore the scrambled sound-bites of after-midnight television, Tracy considered how to pursue that fleeting glimpse of a different personality. Most of the time, she forced herself to control her inquisitiveness and see only the surface Vachon chose to show her, but it wasn't easy. There were about a million questions she wanted to ask him, and every time she saw him, she added a few more to the list.

Finding static at the top of the band, Vachon started down again, pausing now and then to watch ten seconds at random before flipping onward. Just when she was considering lambasting him with the pillow, she spotted something she actually recognized and demanded, "Hey, leave it there. That's *White Nights*. Great film. It's got color and everything."

"Hm?" He was two channels farther on, but he glanced upwards at her through a veil of black lashes, sighed, and reselected the channel. "I hate tuning into the middle of a movie."

"It's only been on about fifteen minutes." Tracy stretched forward to reclaim the remote, tucking it once more beyond reach. "Besides, it's Baryshnikov."

"Who?"

"Mikhail Baryshnikov. He's a ballet dancer. Let me guess, you hate ballet."

"Actually, I liked ballet quite a bit in its heyday. Don't think much of the modern stuff, though."

Tracy decided it would be insufferably rude to admit she was amazed Vachon had ever so much as *witnessed* ballet. "I'd ask when the heyday was, but I'm sure it was before my time."

Vachon leaned his head back on the mattress, his features alive with friendly mockery as he grinned at her upside down. "Oh, *long* before your time."

The movie continued to chatter on in the background, music and tempo building to the storyline's first crisis.

"So, what happened in the first fifteen minutes?" Vachon inquired, cutting off her impulse to pursue a line of questions about his unexpected familiarity with the fine arts.

"Oh, well, Baryshnikov sort of plays himself in it. That is, he's playing a Russian ballet dancer who defected to America and has become a big success. Right now, he's on a commercial flight to Japan, but they've just developed engine trouble. They're going down over the USSR, so he tries to destroy all his identification. That way the KGB won't be able to figure out who he is." Turning her attention to the figures scrambling around on the screen, she added, "That's about where we are now, actually."

The screen music took on a frantic, up-beat tempo as the crippled airliner slammed down on a frozen, Siberian runaway. The sounds of shrieking, terrified passengers intercut with the fingernails-on-blackboard screech of brakes as the huge plane skidded off the end of the runway, sheered off a wing, and began to trail ribbons of flame.

"I really like the film, but this part just looks *so fake*," she commented casually. "Big-budget films usually do a better job with their model work."

"Maybe they didn't want it to look real."

Tracy opened her mouth to question the peculiar statement, but closed it again when she glanced at Vachon. He had dropped his head back against the bed, but this time he wasn't looking at her. His eyes were closed, and his absolute lack of expression screamed how badly he wished his ears were, too. Her own memories overlaid his still features with the first glimpse she'd had of him, one more corpse among the many strewn across a field of burning, twisted steel. His eyes had been open then, his face and body torn to bloody ribbons by the shrapnel of the Air Canada L-1011's fiery demise.

Picking up the remote, Tracy switched off the TV.

It had simply never occurred to her that the plane crash would haunt him. That oversight should have been impossible, but somehow she'd just accepted that the non-human nature which had allowed Vachon to survive made such normal concerns irrelevant. He had never given her any indication she should *think* otherwise, but then she barely understood what went on behind the carefree facade he showed the mortal world. She'd been so overwhelmed by other things--the crash, the existence of vampires, Vudu's threats to the city--that it had taken her a while to even realize it was a facade.

Uncertainly, Tracy reached over and brushed her knuckles against his cheek, feeling the

unnatural chill of his pale skin beneath its texturing of dark stubble.

"Javier . . .?"

Startled by the unexpected touch, his dark eyes flared open, brimming with emotions so raw they were agony to see. They were gone again almost instantly, replaced by casual indifference.

"I'm sorry, Javier, I just wasn't thinking."

"It doesn't matter." He caught her hand and brushed her knuckles with his lips, the gesture archaic and perfectly natural to him.

"Tell me about the crash."

"Curious about everything, aren't you, Tracy Vetter?" There was nothing veiled about the sarcasm, but his voice was too tired to give it any sting.

"Most things, I guess." That was true, but she didn't really want to hear what it was like to live through the few seconds of eternity it took a bomb-torn aircraft to fall from the sky. "But I can be a good listener, too."

He straightened away from the support of the mattress, and sat silently, staring at the now-blank screen of the television or whatever memories his mind was projecting onto it. Tracy could see only the oblique edge of his profile, mostly hidden by a curtain of dark hair. She wished she could see his expression, though it would tell her little about what he was feeling. She was beginning to understand that Vachon's mobile face was an open book that hid far more than it revealed.

"Do you have any idea how long it took us to fall?" he asked suddenly.

The question might have been rhetorical, but when he didn't continue, she answered it literally. "About 15-20 seconds, I heard someone say at the crash site."

His breath huffed out in a sigh that verged on a laugh. "Fifteen hours, maybe. Forever. Something like that."

There was another long silence, then, still without looking at her, he went on, "We were delayed out of Pearson. Got to sit on the taxiway for about half an hour. I was sitting by the window, next to this woman who kept looking at me like I was something her cat dragged in from the trash. Man, I was really wishing I knew how to hack up a hairball. Would've just made her week.

"Finally, we got take-off clearance. We got up a few thousand feet, then the wing went down to start the turn. Great view, a sea of lights from North York right down across Mississauga. Then . . ." He trailed off and swallowed. "I heard the explosion, but I doubt any of the mortals did. There was just this big flash of light, and a jerk, like the plane hit a pothole in the middle of the air, then one of the wings and a big chunk of the cabin just . . . went away. And we fell. I think it was all over before a lot of people even figured out what was happening."

"That's good," Tracy put in softly. "Barely time to be afraid."

"Everything was crazy," he continued, oblivious to the interruption. "The wind was like someone had unleashed a hurricane. Stuff flying around. Fire . . . Blood . . . Chunks of bodies . . . We tumbled like some carnival ride. No up or down, just motion.

"The cabin just kept coming apart around me, and I can remember knowing that I could

move fast enough to get out, but--" He gave a small, humorless laugh "--but that crazy woman next to me didn't care what I looked like anymore. She grabbed hold of my hand, and somehow I just sat there and let her hang on to me. You know how they say time stretches when you're scared or you think you're going to die? Man, they don't know the half of it. It was like there was a whole universe of time crammed into those few seconds."

"Shock, I guess. I mean, you knew you'd survive, but it was still pretty traumatic."

He finally turned his head, looking at her over his shoulder. "Did I know I'd survive? There are ways of killing us, Tracy. If a piece of shrapnel had taken off my head, I would've been gone. Fire can kill us. I bet some of the bodies burned in the wreckage."

"Yes . . ." She shivered at her own memories of the sight, but most of all, the smell. "They did."

"So maybe in those few seconds, I was more a part of humanity than I've been in nearly five centuries. All my lost mortality staring me in the face, and I couldn't think fast enough to get out of it."

He changed position to face her, settled one forearm on the edge of the bed and rested his chin on it. Reaching up with his free hand, he twined a lock of her hair around his fingers, gazing at it while he played with it. Tracy didn't move away, but she swallowed the urge to touch him in return. She wasn't afraid, yet in some instinctive way she knew that when he was like this, all raw emotion and vulnerability, Vachon was dangerous.

Abruptly he moved away again, slouching back to lean against the dresser and giving her a wide, wicked grin that failed to touch his dark eyes.

"The next thing I saw was you leaning over me. Real hard to play dead, lemme tell you, with you playing touchy-feely, looking for a pulse." He rubbed his nose with a finger and shook his head. "Guess I must have imprinted or something, and now there's no getting rid of me."

"That's good. I don't want to get rid of you."

"You should," he told her, his voice again serious. "Much safer. Much healthier."

"Much less interesting," Tracy told him with absolute honesty. "You're the most fascinating person I've ever met. And if I wanted safe and healthy, I would've become a librarian."

His dark gaze held hers for a long moment, then in a too-smooth flexing of muscles, he was on his feet.

"Look, Trace. I'd better go."

A vampire could move at such impossible speed that to human senses they seemed able to vanish into thin air or appear out of it. Vachon took childlike amusement from simply *being* there when she turned around, or saying goodbye, then leaving the apartment by seeming to melt away into nothing. Tracy was almost startled when she made a grab for his wrist, and felt her fingers close around cool, solid flesh.

"Don't leave. Not yet."

White, perfectly ordinary teeth chewed thoughtfully on his lower lip. "It's late."

"It's only late if you're living by day, right? That doesn't include either of us." Not sure he wouldn't be gone the moment she took her hand away, she let go of his wrist and slid to her feet.

"Come on, let's go to the living room. I need some tea." She gave him a slight, rueful smile. "I wish I could offer you some. I've always found tea very relaxing."

"Then do."

"But you can't . . .?" She stumbled on the question, frowning in confusion, then asked, "Would you like some tea?"

"Sure, as long as you don't make me drink it."

"Promise."

Vachon trailed after her as she went to the kitchen. While she filled the kettle with water and set it on the stove, he rummaged through the neatly aligned canisters on the counter, looking for tea bags or simply snooping. The ordinary, everyday elements of her life seemed to fascinate him--the contents of her cupboards and refrigerator, her books, the junk in her medicine cabinet. In anyone else, the inquisitiveness would've been rude. Vachon made it somewhere between amusing and puzzling. Some night, when she was asking those million-and-one questions, she'd have to find out why he cared about all the dull, commonplace things that were irrelevant to his life.

Tonight, it was simply something to do with his hands, a distraction that failed to distract him. He found tea in the third canister, then recapped it the instant he released its pungent scent. Losing interest in what she was doing, he drifted to the couch and settled on a corner of it, with his feet pulled up under him, scuffed sneakers leaving a trail on the off-white fabric.

Tracy set down the mug she'd pulled from the cupboard, hesitated over how far to carry the meaningless ceremony, then took down a second one. Her friendship with Vachon was giving her a new appreciation for how many of the small rituals of human interaction centered around food. It was *awkward* to spend time with someone who couldn't share her popcorn while they watched a movie. Someone she couldn't offer a soda when she got one for herself. She wondered suddenly if his acceptance of her offer of tea was for her benefit or his own, answering his need for comfort or her need to extend it.

She fussed unnecessarily in the kitchen, giving him space to continue talking if he chose, not surprised when he didn't. Vachon wasn't talkative, and he certainly wasn't given to self-analysis. It seemed more than possible that the intensity of his reaction to being reminded of the crash had surprised him as much as it did her.

The kettle began to whistle, so she poured boiling water into each of the mugs, watching it darken to honey-brown warmth that was fragrant with bergamot. She squeezed lemon into each, then dropped the citrus remnants into the trash.

"I hope you like Earl Grey," she offered as she picked up the mugs and carried them to the couch.

Vachon didn't give her the expected wry reminder that he wasn't about to drink tea no matter what type it was. He just took the mug when she held it out, and set it down on the end table beside him.

"Where were you going?" she prompted, when the silence stretched.

"Calgary." His voice was almost back to normal, laced with light, wry irony.

"I *know* that. I mean, were you visiting, moving there permanently, what? Were you running from the Inca?"

"Always thinking the worst of me, Trace?"

"I never thought that."

Vachon's heavy, expressive brows quirked upward to question the statement.

"Well, all right," she admitted. "When I woke up in that sewer, tied up and gagged, with Screed advising you to 'suck me proper', *then* I thought you were a total and absolute low-life."

"Low-life?" He gave a soundless laugh. "Maybe that's the only time you were right."

"I think it's the only time I was wrong."

That earned her another of those fleeting changes of expression, telling her she'd surprised him. After a moment, he shook his head. "Don't fool yourself, Tracy. You're too smart for that."

The comment could have been a warning or a distraction. It was more comfortable to label it a distraction, an attempt to regain the distance he'd lost by sharing his fears and memories.

"Okay, so you weren't running from the Inca."

"Not then. Didn't even know he was in town until I found him with you at the church. The band I was playing with had a gig out west. Two weeks, then home."

"God, you mean you had . . .?"

"Friends aboard?" he finished for her. "I hung around with them, played with them. I guess that makes them friends, doesn't it?"

Vachon picked up the tea mug, sniffed curiously at its contents, then sneezed like a cat and set it hastily back down.

"I love planes," he commented, pointedly changing the subject. "I love the feel of them, all that metal, the vibration, the power. It's so different from just flying on your own."

"I hate flying, it's such a hassle. In planes, that is. For the other way . . . Well, I wouldn't know."

He breathed out a little puff of laughter. "Slept through your one trip with me. Have to try again sometime."

"I'd like that," Tracy told him, then added honestly, "I think." She turned sideways in her seat, until she was facing him. Vachon had gone back to playing with the tea, making her wonder if he was enjoying the warmth of the mug. "Are you going to be all right, Javier?"

"Oh, yeah, sure. Don't worry about it. Caught me a little off guard, that's all." His restless gaze came up to meet hers squarely. "It isn't like I haven't seen hundreds--thousands--of people die worse than that."

"I expect you have," she admitted, without looking away. "That doesn't frighten me, you know."

"It really should, Tracy Vetter."

"Probably. But much though I sometimes hate to admit it, I'm my father's daughter. I'm curious, I'm stubborn as hell, and I don't scare easily."

"I had noticed."

Without warning, he leaned across the few inches that separated them. His lips tasted hers, their fleeting pressure gone again before surprise had given her time to respond. Tracy

didn't hear him move, but before she could open her eyes his absence was telegraphed through the resettling of the sofa cushions.

He was standing near the front door with his back to her, and Tracy could see the rigid stiffness of his muscles as he slipped his arms into the sleeves of his leather jacket and jerked its zippers closed. She wondered how long it would take her to learn to read that eloquent body language, and if it would tell her more than his light, often misleading words.

By the time she climbed to her feet, the tension had bled out of his stance. As she approached him, Vachon let his breath out in a long, audible sigh and turned to face her.

"Thank you, Tracy."

"For what?"

He shrugged. "For being an optimist, I guess. For listening. Whatever."

"You don't have to go yet."

"Yes, I do. Believe me."

"But--"

He raised a finger to her lips to still the protest, then left it there just long enough to trace their outline. "Leave it, Tracy. Please."

"Why?" she demanded softly.

With one hand on the apartment door, he looked back at her over his shoulder. "Not tonight, okay? I'm just not up to the truth tonight."

"Sure, I understand." That was probably her biggest lie in many years. "But, hey, tell you what, how about I rent *The Maltese Falcon* tomorrow night? I've never seen it, either."

Vachon grinned. "I know."

"I'll bring the popcorn. And I won't make you eat any."

His eyes drooped closed, hiding whatever silent argument he was holding within himself. When they opened again, there was nothing in them but irony and bright amusement. "Sure, why not? But be sure you understand one thing, okay?"

"What?"

"If you get the colorized version, I'm leaving."

"Deal."

When he was gone, she rinsed her mug to the sink, then returned to the couch. Claiming Vachon's untouched tea, she curled her fingers around it, absorbing the last of its heat while she thought about all the unspoken things that had burned between them from the moment they met.

"You sure aren't making this easy, Vachon," she told the empty apartment. Two months of searching, and she still hadn't found a solid, sensible foundation on which to anchor the relationship that was building between them. She couldn't even decide if Vachon was helping her look, or simply indulging her because a few nights or weeks or even *years* must have little meaning in an eternal lifetime.

Absently, she brushed her fingers across her lips, remembering an arctic chill warmed by mutual longing.

"If I had any common sense, I'd give up on this," she told the quiet emptiness, then got up and went in search of the telephone book. While she was waiting for some of that to develop, she might as well start phoning the video stores.

AN OBJECT TO BE TOYED WITH

by: *Lorraine Duffield*

a stranger waits in the moonlight . . . you know him the instant you see him . . . the smile he wears only for you . . . inspires more fear than it dispells . . . mesmerized you watch the smile widen . . . then elongate . . . he has come for you alone . . . the shiver you feel . . . is born of pure terror . . . to your eternal shame . . . the thrill seeker in you shouts . . . yes . . . even as your hands clench into fists . . . sweet temptation quickens your heart . . . speeding your feet even faster . . . so that now you draw abreast with him . . . you are titilated now . . . not frightened . . . your eyes meet . . . then part . . . his gaze is over your shoulder . . . at the female standing there . . . surrounded by a mist . . . it floats weightless . . . with a cry of joy . . . she runs to him . . . you are left alone . . . feeling abandoned . . . full of shame . . . embarassed . . . how could you have thought . . . he had come for you . . . foolish woman . . . turn and go home . . . head bowed . . . oblivious . . . to the obstacle in your path . . . what's this . . . a new challenge . . . or are you . . . a toy . . . to these preternatural immortals . . . he gives you a choice . . . rare indeed . . . such as you . . . never garners a second thought . . . take it . . . don't run . . . what you knew before . . . is in the past . . . dead . . . as the ash covered city . . . his first home . . . you are his . . . make the last decision . . . of your mortal life . . . now . . .

THE CALLER

by: *Denysé M. Bridger*

"Pain is a tangible reality in some circles."

LaCroix listened to the words, felt the waking of an inner curiosity about the young voice that was so aged by despair and unwanted wisdom.

"Is pain your truest companion?" he asked quietly. His eyes no longer saw the dark shadow of the microphone, his senses filled with the fury of intense emotion that emanated from the faceless caller.

"Truest?"

Irony . . . And tremendous bitterness . . . LaCroix shivered, a ripple of excitement brushed his spine. Buried beyond the anguish lay even stronger emotions. Desires, carefully hidden from any scrutiny. Hungers that ignited his macabre pleasures.

"Who are you?"

Dead air answered his breathy query, and he waited, reached for the essence. Nothing responded to his probe.

She was gone . . .

* * *

Dream of me . . .

Startled, LaCroix peered into the darkness that surrounded him, his vision unimpeded by the shadows. THE RAVEN was silent now, dawn only minutes away. He'd been alone for several hours, yet the voice filled his senses. Had he heard it within his mind, or had it somehow been externally audible?

Vampires don't dream, my dear, he laughed to himself. But he felt the twinge of awareness that reminded him it was a lie. The truth was simpler: he hadn't dreamed in a very long time.

* * *

Almost a week had passed before he heard her voice again. The nightclub was filled with people, mortal heartbeats drowned the blare of music and the more subtle, sibilant hiss of vampire hungers. From his select vantage point, LaCroix surveyed the mass of humanity, and smiled as a faint tremor of agony kissed his consciousness.

He straightened in his chair, glanced at the computer screen, and flipped a switch on his

control board.

"You've been lured back to the night," he purred into the microphone.

"I belong to the night . . . That's why you understand."

"We talked about pain, you never answered my question." LaCroix's curiosity was aroused, though he'd never concede it.

"Why answer the obvious?"

"What is it you want from me?"

"From you?"

Amusement filled his mind, and her laughter woke a quiver of longing deep within him. As before, he couldn't be sure if the sound was real, or merely his delusion.

"Tell me about dying?"

"You assume I know death," he countered, and his eyes began to search the room as his sense of recognition sharpened.

"I assume nothing, I simply know your darkness."

"You know nothing of me."

"I know your soul . . ."

"I know your secrets . . ."

LaCroix's handsome features distorted into a scowl of frustrated fury when the words stopped, and as abruptly as he'd felt her nearness, he was faced with nothingness again.

* * *

Silk sheets, the colour of rich burgundy wine, caressed cool skin, the effect was sensual, provocative. LaCroix sighed and settled onto his back, his deep sapphire eyes softened with weariness and the simple pleasure of relaxation. Slowly, he closed his eyes and waited for the blackness of sleep to engulf him.

A low groan of blissful pleasure slipped from the master vampire's lips as he stirred back into awareness. He tried to open his eyes, found only darkness, and shuddered again when he realised he was unable to pierce the heavy veil of obscurity. He was unable to move.

I told you to dream . . . I asked it of you . . . Dream of me . . .

LaCroix trembled violently, lost in the throes of passion that assailed him in his total darkness. Unseen hands smoothed over the contours of his body, and a warm mouth explored with a gentleness that was an exquisite agony of delight. He felt the whispery touch of soft breasts against his thighs, rigid nipples tickling his skin as his unknown lover eased his legs apart.

Wet heat enveloped him, and his hips pushed into the warmth, begged for stronger contact, and still she teased him, kept him hovering on the edge of euphoria. Eventually, her tongue snaked lower, delved into his most intimate places.

LaCroix wrenched himself free of the invisible bonds that held him, and bolted upright with a hoarse gasp. The shadows that had blinded him disappeared, but he was alone. Her scent hung in the air -- sweet . . . feminine . . . hungry with lust. He tried to find some trace of her within the spacious bedroom, and detected nothing.

A rush of breeze fluttered the curtains inward, and he glanced down at his uncovered nakedness. His body glistened in the cold silvery-white light from the rising moon. Day had passed into night, and he hadn't felt the transition of time, hadn't awakened at sunset -- for the first time in a thousand years. The moisture that anointed his limbs was not his own, there was no trace of blood, no betraying stain on the bedding.

And he ached with unfulfilled passion.

Something else he hadn't experienced in many centuries.

* * *

Nights passed, turned into weeks, and she remained elusive.

No calls.

No dreams.

No whispers to interfere with LaCroix's cultivated detachment.

Yet, every woman who walked into THE RAVEN was examined by the ancient vampire, her mind and manner carefully observed.

With the absence of her mystery, he grew restless and irritable.

Her words haunted him: *I know your soul . . . I know your secrets . . .*

The obsession took hold and he didn't see it happening, wasn't able to recognise the trap he'd perfected and defined over the centuries.

* * *

"Have you dreamed?"

LaCroix froze, his entire body motionless, expectancy made him feel dizzy. He laughed inwardly at his own weakness, then frowned at the microphone, angered by her arrogance.

"I am the dream," he said softly. His voice was a sensuous rasp of sound that caressed the airwaves, and incited the desires and hidden hungers of all who listened.

"Chimera . . . dark fantasy . . . demon . . . " She paused, her voice softened to thoughtful speculation. "All these are your names, yet not. Do you want me?"

"You have a companion, a lover more faithful than I would ever be," LaCroix taunted.

"Pain," she acquiesced.

The word was a stroke of evocative sensuality. He waited.

"Teach me freedom."

"I prefer to keep you enslaved."

"Then be my slave again, immortal dream."

* * *

He knew before he crawled between the shimmering sheets that he would find no true rest. He felt her close to him. She wasn't vampire. It was the only thing he knew with certainty. She'd been in THE RAVEN, he'd caught her scent, subtle, aroused, a stimulant to

his already ensnared mind.

LaCroix shut his eyes, attuned his senses to the intricate resonances of his home.

Nothing altered.

There was no shift of air, no motion of any kind.

But she came to him.

This time, he was ready to embrace her.

The images coiled and writhed within his head . . . he saw himself . . . entwined in a lover's arms . . . felt her heat around him . . . her mouth . . . her hands . . . and he heard her soul cry his name . . .

He never saw her face . . .

* * *

The Night Crawler seethed as he poured his rage into the night. His hand shook as he keyed the panel and listened to another foolish mortal woman attempt to seduce him with her pleas and promises. They all pretended, and he hated them for it. The caller he waited for had been silent again, until he had begun to think her nothing more than an aberration created within his mind.

LaCroix barely repressed a growl of fury when a murky shadow enveloped him. He looked up, stared disdainfully into dark brown eyes, then dismissed her with a look. Pain registered for a fleeting moment as their gazes locked, but he felt no recognition. She sobbed quietly, and ran. He felt nothing, not even the amused pleasure he would once have experienced at the terror in her.

* * *

Blood . . .

Crimson . . . still warm . . .

It covered his hands.

LaCroix tasted bitterness, spit the offending tang from his mouth as he looked down at her body. This one had been bolder than others, her hazel eyes challenged as her voluptuous curves enticed his attention. And he'd thought, fleetingly, that he'd found her. The caller.

He roared his wrath to the heavens, eyes alive with red fire, fangs elongated and aching with unappeased hunger. He'd torn this bitch's throat out in his eagerness, and she revolted him.

* * *

The master vampire sat alone in his darkness.

The luxurious apartment was shadowed with soft candlelight and the more intangible intensity of brooding melancholy. He sat, still as death, elegantly attired, regal in bearing. One long-fingered hand curved around the slender stem of a crystal goblet, the ruby wine within the

bowl was untouched.

"Teach me freedom."

The glass fell from LaCroix's hand.

Before he could recover, her arms encircled his neck and he felt the warmth of her cheek next to his. She was behind him, and her breasts, soft and full, cushioned his shoulders. Her scent poured over him, flooded his mind, made his body tremble with the passion he'd refused to acknowledge. His fingers closed over her wrists and he very slowly pulled her around to face him.

She dropped to her knees and her head bowed. Streams of shining brown hair fell like a curtain, and he noted the play of light that haloed her. Gleaming within the softness of brown were threads of golden sunshine and the paler ice of silver moonbeams.

"Look at me."

He hardly recognised his own voice, heard the rasp of suppressed excitement as though it were distant, apart from him.

"I can't."

LaCroix rose, eased her to her feet with him, then he slid his hands into the masses of hair that obstructed his view. When she would have looked away he held her face between his hands and smiled. She was not beautiful. She was not the slender, angelic wraith he had envisioned. She was pretty in an ordinary way, curvaceous when the present fashion was rail-thin, and she did not tremble at his touch -- an awareness that annoyed him when he accepted his own level of exhilaration.

"Look at me," he repeated when she continued to stare past him.

For several seconds, time stood still, and LaCroix felt the tiny shift of her head when she finally did as he requested. Her gaze rose to his, and his vision filled with pure, meadow-green colour. The emotion impacted an instant later, and he shuddered at the wash of misery and pain that battered his psyche. Her smile came slowly, but did not banish the agony he felt within her.

His hands moved, glided over her shoulders, slipped beneath the gauzy material of her dress. Buttons opened at his careless manipulations, until the garment pooled on the floor at her feet. Her eyes never left his, her expression didn't falter.

She was his.

And they both knew it.

LaCroix swiftly discarded his clothes and gathered her into his arms. In the second before his mouth covered hers, he heard the gasp of her voice; "Teach me how to live . . . and die."

He pulled her body into contact with his, felt a surge of undeniable satisfaction when she shivered violently at the touch, then he drew her deep into his kiss as her hands began to explore the living dream that now held them both prisoners.

The images that had haunted him, teased and tormented him, all became real throughout the long night. She worshipped him, loved him, and fed him. And in return, LaCroix taught her the freedom of passion, and the ecstasy of being alive in a lover's arms. He'd been stunned to discover there had been no one before him.

"I can give you eternity," he murmured into her ear. His mouth moved to her neck and his tongue stroked the wounds he'd inflicted. He'd drank from her veins several times during their lovemaking, another time would end her life.

"You've given me all I wanted, and more," she replied in a shaken whisper. "Grant me your kindest gift, Lucien."

He stared down into her eyes, saw the change that had come into her look, and he understood clearly for the first time. Sorrow had melted into joy, and pain had receded to wonder and happiness. He had tasted her death in her blood. His hands moved, raised her hips to meet his possession, and his fangs sank into her throat. She sighed softly, and clung to him.

* * *

The master vampire gazed down at the marble headstone, then smiled as he bent to place a single white rose at the base of the polished surface. Peace filled his veins, and when he permitted himself to remember her, he knew it was her soul that sang to him late at night.

He had never known her name.

The inscription that had been etched into the stone was unpretentious: *Freedom Granted*

"Dream of me," LaCroix said softly, then turned and walked from the small cemetery.

At the ornate wrought iron gates, he allowed himself the luxury of a backward glance. He nodded, and his smile grew softer. Seated beside the grey marker, the fragile white bloom held reverently in gentle hands, she watched his departure. Her eyes met his, and her smile was radiant with gratitude for the gift he'd given her.

HUNGER

circa 1270
(suffer the children)

by: Cyndi Bayless Overstreet

Pain.

Searing through his abdomen, he doubled over. It wasn't possible to feel such emptiness, emptiness that burned. A moan tore from his lips.

"Why are you doing this to me!?"

His fingers gripped the walls of the impenetrable cell, clawing, raking rivulets into the stone. Again and again.

"Why have you left me . . . like this!"

Silence.

The labored agony of his breathing rose to fill the hush of his despair. His eyes traced the trails tore by his desperation into the mortar of the wall. Crimson stained, the blood called, taunting the beast. It built to a crescendo in his chest . . .

Tore from his lips . . .

A roar that shook deeply.

He collapsed against the wall; his lips sought, in vain, the drying residue of his own life force tainting the molder. Dignity crumbled as his tongue sought the solace, beckoning, unobtainable, from the crevices.

"Why?" he wailed, choked back tears his body could no longer shed.

You seek defiance, mon enfant? Taste its bitter destitution . . .

Spasms gripped him. He clutched his stomach. Too weak to wail, he slowly sank to the floor, sobs choking his throat, and buried his face into his hands . . .

In front of him -- the demon had forced him to watch.

"I despise you! Do you hear me? Utterly. I despise you both." His throat closed around his cries.

His tongue sought the torn tips of his fingers, lapped, sucked, in hopeless degradation. His body trembled violently. *Shall I be forced to consume myself?* He gnawed^d, bit viciously into his hands. Still, the blood refused to flow. It trickled. Its scant essence danced upon his tongue -- taunted . . .

"Mon Dieu!"

In front of him.

Memories clustered in the corners of his weakened mind, fighting toward the forefront. He sucked, drawing deeply from his ruined hands. Cold, metallic flesh. Eyes dry,

burned to shed their crimson flow.

Solace.

Trembling, he curled around himself on the floor and suckled, nursed, from his unresponsive fingers . . .

"Propriétaire d'esclaves!"

* * *

"The Orient? You've never known such indignities as travel aboard a sea vessel produces for one of our kind. Mark my words, Nicholas, you'll dine on rats and proclaim them *délicieux* cuisine."

"We would travel the overland route via Acre, Hormuz, across the Gobi on camels."

"Camels," LaCroix spat. "Foul, vicious beasts. Travelling with mortals in such blatant fashion, *cela ne se fait pas!*"

"In whose opinion?"

"Mine."

"Marco has begged me to come along," he gushed in undisguised enthusiasm. "Ivory, pearls, silk, and spices beyond compare shall be mine for the taking."

"None of which possesses meaning to us."

"All of which possesses meaning to me."

"You're a selfish, greedy child, Nicholas. Such worldly obsessions wrought naught but suspicion and envy among those who would discern our secret and those who seek to maintain its sanctity, those whose ire you would be reckless to provoke."

"I'll do as I please, and provoke who I will!"

A smile touched the vampire's lips. *"En vérité?"*

* * *

He fought for the oblivion of sleep, beseeched its elusive tentacles to embrace and pull him under. Hunger gnawed at his entrails, drawing him back to the glare of reality. Even the comfort of death teased, fled from his grasp . . .

His mouth drew solace from the mesmerizing rhythm of his pseudo feeding conveyed to his numbed senses. The pain of his ravaged fingers, their wounds self-inflicted, grew to a mere whisper in the background of his despair. He moaned as the memories rose to claim him.

"Je regrette!"

* * *

"You won't believe what wondrous tales I heard tonight . . ." The words died on Nicholas' lips and he froze in the doorway of their Venetian suite.

A vision, draped in silver, the gown caressing her flawless form, her allure as eternal as the wisp of alabaster cheek glimpsed from beneath the touch of mask gracing her eyes --

Janette.

The festival.

He'd forgotten all about it. It was all abuzz throughout the canals and *calli* of Venice, yet he'd managed to remain oblivious in his excitement, captivated, as he was, by the tales of exotic places recanted to him by his newest friends, young Marco and the Brothers Polo.

He opened his mouth to beg forgiveness when movement caught his attention from the corner of his eye, and he turned to see LaCroix breeze into the room from the bedchamber.

The bedchamber Janette and Nicholas shared.

The master vampire smoothed his crisp linen shirt neatly over his hose and donned a surcoat of elaborate red brocade, a fetching accompaniment to the scarlet cape he would later drape and broach across his broad shoulders.

As if oblivious to his presence, or in blatant disregard, LaCroix slipped behind the beguiling Janette and wrapped his arms around her slender waist . . .

She swayed backward, and melted into his embrace.

His lips greedily caressed the base of her swanlike neck causing her to moan deep in her throat, passionately, as Nicholas heard her moan so many times, but never in the arms of another man.

That man.

His throat constricted, choking him . . .

LaCroix's eyes caught his, acknowledged his presence, his anguish, as his lips continued their tantalizing foreplay.

After-play?

Anger surged, tearing through his chest. His eyes cut to the door of their bedchamber and locked. His mind conjured the massive canopied bed, pristine linen sheets, woolen blankets tumbled to the floor . . .

"*Ma Janette.*" The ancient vampire nibbled at the lobe of her delicate ear. "*Miel sucré.*"

"*Mon éternel, LaCroix.*"

He lunged toward them.

* * *

Pain.

Wisps of thought, memory, taunted his mind. Sucked into the blackness of restless delusion and sleep, he moaned aloud; it echoed into the destitution of the chamber where he lay. Curled into the solace of self-mutilation, hands that refused to heal, regeneration no longer possible, he fought to cry aloud. Couldn't.

She is mine, mon Nicholas, eternally . . . as are you.

"Go to hell!"

* * *

"You think to confront me?"

"You have no right!"

"I possess every right." The master vampire chuckled softly, his lips tipped in a challenge. "Make no mistake."

Insanity ripped away reason and Nicholas lunged forward to tear the smirk from the ancient lips.

He found himself on the floor, looked up, dazed.

LaCroix towered above him. "You shall never leave us."

"You own us!" he spat in outrage. "That's what you're saying."

The pale countenance darkened in warning.

"*Propriétaire d'esclaves.*"

Rage shattered the alabaster mask. "You shall not address me in such fashion."

"And that --" Nicholas hissed, turning seething eyes upon the silver draped vision of loveliness shimmering in a corner of the room, her eyes widened by the sudden turn of events.

"Your concubine."

"Enough!"

"*Au contrair, mon maître*, it shall never be enough."

He saw the warning darken Janette's eyes a fraction of a second too late . . .

* * *

Venice.

City of eternal beauty and infinite delights. Gondolas in the moonlight. A thousand flames of brilliance reflected on the Grand Canal. Byzantine cathedrals, palaces of aristocracy towering into fathomless horizons . . .

Cornucopia of hedonism, narcissism.

The mesmerizing rhythm, lapping waves caressing the flat bottom gondola. The whisper of an ivory cheek turned in feigned modesty. Ruby lips touched by moonlight.

Waves. Stroking. Caressing . . .

Moonlight. Whispers.

Do you hunger?

* * *

"*Assez!* He has been punished enough."

"That determination is mine to make, not yours, Janette."

"*Je vous prie!*"

"We must protect him from his own foolishness."

The voices filtered through his dazed senses as he lay crumpled in the corner of the suite. Unable to lift his head, the voices raged on around him . . .

"He is part of us, LaCroix."

"And he shall forever remain so. *Il le faut.*"

"He's endured enough."

it." "Accept his fate, ma chérie -- " the voice fell to an icy whisper, " -- and prepare to join

* * *

"Open your eyes."

"Non!"

"You will, or I shall slice away the lids." An iron fist gripped Nicholas' hair, yanked back his head. "I never threaten."

He opened his eyes.

Dazed, the wreckage of the suite swam into focus around him. Janette shimmered in the shadows, her eyes wide with the realization of what she'd foolishly unleashed.

Nicholas' gaze cut her with rancor.

She looked away.

"You think to challenge me? To strike me?" LaCroix hissed against his ear. "Think again."

"You can have the wench."

"At your concession," he spat. "You concede nothing. You have not the power to grant that which is already mine to possess."

His head swam and he squeezed his eyes shut, sank limply into LaCroix's unyielding grasp.

"Open them!"

Weakly, he obeyed.

"Close them again at your own peril."

His heart froze in his chest.

"You dare to tell me what I can and cannot have, impudent child," he hissed against his ear. "Watch . . . and learn."

* * *

The Orient beckoned.

Visions of an exotic land, peoples of which he'd only dreamed. Marco begged him to come along, to experience all the wonders the world had to offer and the richness of silk, spices, camphor, ivory . . .

Wealth beyond his deepest imaginings.

Silver . . . ?

* * *

. . . Folds of metallic shimmer before his gaze . . .

LaCroix's masterful hands slipped along the supple slope of her throat, tilted her chin, exposed the tantalizing expanse to Nicholas' dazed vision.

His heart rose into his throat.

A hiss parted the master vampire's lips, fangs descended. He caught the younger vampire's eyes from across the room, held them, demanded nothing less than submission.

Nicholas caught his breath.

LaCroix's lips traced the tender hollow of Janette's throat. Her eyes sought Nicholas. Squeezed shut . . .

He was not granted such concession.

Watch.

* * *

The gentle rhythm of waves caressed the bow. Brightly painted gondolas draped in silk, sliced the canals. Cobblestone calli teamed with the ebb and flow of gaily attired men and women.

An ethnic ensemble of culinary delights.

The turn of her cheek. Eyes beckoning. Lips hinting.

Do you hunger?

* * *

Betrayal.

LaCroix's elongated canines tipped crimson in the candles' glow, sank deeply, luxuriantly, into her ivory skin, again and again. Lips savored the flow trickling down the silken flesh, stark against its whiteness. Beckoning.

Nicholas moaned as the beast within stirred.

Minutes. Hours . . .

Eternity.

The candles waned, their tapers trickling into molten pools.

Passion burned in the artistry of LaCroix's touch. Lips caressed, fangs claimed her yielding flesh. Feeding deeply . . .

His eyes sought, trapped, the young vampire, drew him from his refuge; his tongue teased the crimson flood, his gaze alight with understanding. His lips in scarlet hue twisted into a taunt.

We three are one.

Nicholas pulled his breath as he realized . . .

The ancient vampire sensed his passion.

Flushed by the shame of his rising arousal, Nicholas withdrew into the sanctuary of self, longed to turn away, longed to never turn away.

Satiated by the flow, LaCroix drew a final draught and sighed deeply.

Nicholas squeezed his eyes shut and crouched farther into the darkened corner where LaCroix's blows had left him. Trembling, he drew his knees to his chest, tightly gripped his arms around them, and sought the seclusion of the shadows.

"Watch!"

His eyes flew wide. Surely the master's lust was sated . . .

Graceful hands slipped along the shimmering folds of her gown, caressed the hills and valleys of her immaculate form, down the sway of her back, over the rise of her derrière. Lower . . .

You think to abandon us?

. . . across lean thighs.

"You can never leave us, Nicholas," LaCroix hissed and brutally grabbed the hem of her dress, yanked upward. "We are each other!"

Janette gasped in sudden alarm.

He shoved her bodily against the back of the sofa, crushed her gown to her waist.

"NO!" The cry tore from Nicholas' soul and he lunged toward her.

She clasped his hand . . .

. . . held tight.

* * *

Désobéissance est fatal.

* * *

Sound.

A faint, persistent scraping reached his ears. Weakly, he sought its source and his eyes fell to the wall of his prison cell; a fine dusting of mortar began to pile at its base. The sound grew. Near the floor a scant crack appeared.

Something moved in the darkness beyond . . .

Nicholas dragged himself toward the source.

A slender hand emerged and fell limply to the floor, its fingers pitifully torn.

His heart caught in his throat.

So close . . .

He rested his cheek against the tiny hand as darkness reclaimed his senses.

* * *

She raced along the calle, her footfalls dancing across the cobblestones. Paused, hands pressed against the stony palazzo, turned, eyes beckoning, fathomless blue, hinting of infinite horizons . . .

Ruby lips tipped in secrets of seduction; her allure awash in moonlight.

"Come to me, mon Nickola." Shadows traced the curve of her cheek as she tilted her nose upward. "Do you hunger for my passion?"

He melted into her embrace. "Eternally."

* * *

The chilling mortar of the floor penetrated his senses, dragged him from the delusions. His tiny visitor was gone. Loneliness seized him. He moaned, curled tightly into himself and instinctively suckled the unresponsive fingers of his ravaged hands.

Do you hunger?

He moaned again and cried aloud as pain constricted his abdomen. His ragged breath rose to fill the dim of cell.

"Discipline est cessaire, mon jeune fils," a voice whispered.

Delusion and illusion. *My mind has finally gone.* He didn't bother to move.

"Nicholas," the silken voice persisted. *"Lève-toi."*

He was no longer alone!

He fought to raise his head -- failed -- it dropped back to the floor, useless. His eyes struggled open and he saw the pale vision towering over him.

Betrayal.

He bared his fangs and hissed.

"Ever defiant," LaCroix chuckled softly.

"I shall never forgive you."

"Never is a long, long time," the ancient vampire intoned sagely. "But, if it is your desire that I should leave you . . ." He turned to go.

"No!" Nicholas struggled to stand -- failed -- fell back to the cold, unyielding floor.

"Don't . . . leave me." The plea escaped his parched lips.

LaCroix paused. Poised in an air of arrogance, he studied the crumpled form of his Nicholas, pale and drawn, his graceful hands and arms gnawed in desperate self-mutilation. He sighed and knelt at the young one's side. *"Discipline est cessaire,"* he repeated softly. "I desire only that you should come to me. Do you truly believe that I relish such action?"

His eyes passed weakly over the master's face then widened as the horror dawned. "You enjoyed it!"

A smile danced across his lips.

"Diable."

LaCroix shrugged. "We each possess our own Achilles' heel. What of you, mon Nicholas?" His eyes penetrated the young vampire as if seeking the secret of his soul. "What desires do you hide, even from yourself?"

He growled low in his throat.

"I am well fed." The glow of his cheeks attested to the fact. "And you?"

Nicholas trembled violently and tore his eyes from the smirk.

"Would I deign to share this bounty?" LaCroix lowered the neck of his shirt, exposed his porcelain flesh. His throat!

A joke! A cruel, twisted perversion of humor. "I perish and you offer levity."

"None intended." His face grew stoic. He lifted his chin, ripped the collar lower.

"Boire."

This wasn't happening.

The blood of the master, rich, bountiful, elixir of his eternal existence.

Return to the source . . .

His eyes locked on the marble flesh, and he pulled the air deeply into his lungs, fought to still the trembling of his body.

"Drink."

Was it possible to desire anything so much? Spasms wracked his abdomen as he struggled to a sitting position, his eyes captivated by the exposed line of throat, the elixir of his eternal existence . . .

He reached for LaCroix.

The master vampire eluded his advance. "Tell me, Nicholas, which was the greater betrayal, watching me with her . . .

Or her with me?

He froze and pulled in his breath; the complexity of emotion staggered his befuddled mind.

Pale limbs bronzed by candlelight. Graceful strength, straining, thrusting into the contours of supple beauty, nails gripping flesh, passion-twisted silhouettes, sepia hued in the flame's glow . . . extensions of himself . . .

We three are one.

He cried aloud and deeply sank his fangs into his palm to satiate the lust. He would not answer the accusation.

What desires do you hide?

"Suffer my children, and forbid them not to come unto me'," LaCroix softly intoned. "Come."

A sigh rent his soul and he folded into LaCroix's embrace, fangs seeking the source of all existence. *"I hunger."* The confession burned with shame.

"Moi aussi."

NICHOLAS

by: *Lorraine Duffield*

Images of blood fill my eyes
all the years of your deaths
voices cracking with terror
scream out for mercy
not to be found here
only the most frugal of gourmets
who spills not a drop
of the life fountain coursing past my throat
to my fingertips and toes
blood rush fills my head
mad with the ecstasy of it all
my pleasure runs out in chortles and guffaws
eyes full of scarlet tears
as my heart breaks once again
madness close at hand
another has died so I can live
the Guilt tears at me
as much as I hate it
I also love the orgasm that rips through my body
as it fills with life
temporarily.

LACROIX

by: Wolfe-Heart

*You yearn to look into my eyes,
foolish.*

*You long to captivate my heart,
impossible.*

*You ache to caress my flesh,
reckless.*

*You desire me,
deadly.*

REQUIESCANT IN PACE

by: Denysé M. Bridger

* * * * *

Before FOREVER KNIGHT went to second season, Tracy Essam proposed a series of stories based on the idea of how LaCroix would make himself known to Nick Knight. This was written for that series, and is, not surprisingly, vastly different from what appeared in the show . . .

* * * * *

The underground parking garage was nearly deserted, and every small sound seemed to echo endlessly. Nick Knight was growing more irritable with each moment that passed; his contact was almost an hour late, and instinct was telling him the reason wouldn't be good. He was well and truly tired of this particular case, the investigation had been long, dull, and fruitless. Stonetree had been backed into a corner by an old friend, someone he apparently owed a favour, and Nick and Schanke ended up assigned the task of finding several high school girls who'd gone missing. One in particular -- Ned Landry's daughter. After several days of searching, the lead Nick was hoping for never materialised, so he'd been forced to report nothing to the captain. Not the most favourable of results to Stonetree's way of thinking.

Nick was about to give it up and go home when the distinct sound of a gunshot had him out of his Caddy and racing toward the far end of the garage. He pulled his gun as he ran, and damn near landed on his ass when he was grabbed from behind and hauled back. He caught his balance swiftly and turned to glare at the person who'd stopped him. Huge emerald eyes stared back at him, and his eyebrows rose in surprise.

"Stay back," she hissed, obviously furious at his sudden appearance. She ignored him and turned to peer around the corner she'd been using for cover. The .22 she carried was held in extremely steady hands.

"I'm a cop," Nick snapped, his already unpleasant mood grew in response to the annoyance in her expression.

"Does that mean you can't get your ass shot off as easily as the next guy?"

Choosing not to tell her that, in his case, that's precisely what it meant, Nick gritted his teeth and glowered at her. The effect was wasted since she was no longer looking at him.

"Do you mind telling me what's going on?" He leaned over her and glanced around the corner. His curiosity was rewarded with a bullet whizzing by his head.

"We're getting shot at," she supplied with marked sarcasm. "Circle them, the nearest exit is at the end of this hallway. There are only two of them, and one is so chicken shit he won't be much of a problem!"

Nick cast another look at her, assumed she was a cop he just hadn't met yet, and headed off in the direction she'd indicated. He pretended he didn't notice the silent alarm in his head.

It took less than two minutes to make the circle, but during that time, the two men she'd cornered had managed to turn the tables. Nick saw the rush, and he fired, the aim so natural it was casual. His target went down with a howl of pain and clutched his thigh as his gun skittered across the floor. The second man halted in his steps. *Chicken shit*, Nick thought with a wry smile. He pulled out his badge and identified himself as he crossed the space that separated him from the perps. He had the second man cuffed and was headed back to his car to call for an ambulance before he saw her again.

"Nice of you to stop by," Nick remarked.

"Ah, man," the prisoner exclaimed, the tone a near whine. "Jesus! Lady, don't you ever quit?"

"You should have told me what I wanted when I asked nice, Vinnie," she replied sweetly. "Now you're gonna have to explain it to the cops."

"Wait a minute," Nick interrupted. "Are you telling me you're not a cop?"

"She's a P.I., man," Vinnie told Nick before she could say a word. "A *psychic* P.I.!" He concluded with a sneer of contempt.

"You're joking," Nick smirked. For the first time, he let his eyes take note of her. No, definitely not a cop he could have missed, he thought, as his smile grew. She looked about twenty-five, maybe thirty, was roughly five and a half feet tall, had deep green eyes, and a mane of coppery red hair that seemed to go on forever despite it being tied into a braid at her back. Her skin was ivory white, and Nick felt an undeniable twitch of reaction when his gaze dropped to the slightly smiling lips.

"Do you have a problem with my occupation, Detective?"

Nick shook his head and tried to tone down the smile her question evoked. Still amused, he met the sharp emerald gaze.

"Do you have a name, sweetheart?" He suspected he already knew it, but the sardonic tone was at direct odds with everything he'd been told about Stonetree's specialist.

"Yeah, and it's not 'Sweetheart'," she replied with a grin that was teasing. She extended her hand, and the expression slipped a tiny bit when Nick's fingers closed around hers. "I'm Celia Hampton."

"Nick Knight," he supplied. His guess had been correct. "You want to tell me what this was all about?"

"I'll file a report. Right now I have an appointment to keep," she said, and ducked away before Nick could make a grab to stop her.

He had two choices, let her go, or lose his prisoners. Since Vinnie and his partner had been shooting at him, (and Celia), he decided to hang onto the prisoners.

"That chick's crazy," Vinnie declared.

Nick didn't bother with a comment and put in a call to the station.

* * *

"You came to file the report, after all," Nick observed when he strolled into the squad room and caught sight of the woman who was perched on the end of his desk.

Celia glanced up, genuinely startled by the familiar voice.

Nick's smile made her straighten up a little and she waited until he was leaning back in his chair, grinning up at her. "The report's been filed for about a half hour, Detective Knight. I'm waiting for someone," she added quietly.

"Your 'appointment'?" Nick's smile slipped when he caught sight of Ryan Jones. Jones was clearly headed in their direction, the smile that lit his features one of obvious pleasure. Nick couldn't suppress the thought that Ryan was too much of a moron to interest this woman, but Celia apparently knew the other officer. She shrugged at Nick then rose to meet Jones.

"Hi, Nick. Celia told me you got caught in the middle of one of her stakeouts."

Nick was about to answer, when she surprised him into silence with her responding statement.

"What I told you, Ryan, was Nicholas Knight probably saved my life." She looked back at Nick for a moment, her eyes barely making contact before she turned to Ryan again. Somehow, the implied friendliness of his manner irritated her -- something that rarely happened when she was in a squad room. "Now, if you have the information I was after, would you mind giving it to me so I can get back to my hotel?"

Nick's smile graduated to a smirk and he raised a hand to his mouth, covering at least some of the expression as he eyed Ryan's discomfort at the direct request.

"I thought we might --"

"Another time, Ryan," Celia interrupted. "It's been a hellish day, and I just want to crawl into a warm bed for the next few years!" When the bluntness of tone registered in her weary brain, she summoned up a bright smile and added. "I really am tired, Ryan. We will have dinner, sometime, I promise. Just not tonight, okay?"

Nick watched the other man's jaw clench in response to the polite brush-off, but Ryan didn't say a word. He nodded, then turned with a soft, "The file's on my desk." He'd returned within seconds, handed her the folder, and went back to work without another word spoken between them.

Intending to leave, something made Celia hesitate, and she sat back on the edge of Knight's desk. She clearly wanted to say something and she glanced at Nick again as she tried to find the right words. His smile had vanished, and the expression on his features now was thoughtful and expectant.

Still uncertain, she decided not to analyse whatever it was that nagged at her. She stood up and smiled into gentle blue eyes. "It was nice meeting you, Detective," Celia murmured quietly. "And thanks for your help earlier." She would have left, but the door to Stonetree's office swung open and the captain stopped her.

"Celia, can I talk to you for a minute?" He turned to go back inside, then added, "You, too, Nick."

She shrugged and they went into the captain's office together.

* * *

"I'm glad you two have finally met," Stonetree said quietly, and settled his large frame into the well worn leather chair behind his desk. "I was going to ask you to come in for just that reason," he continued, his words directed to the lovely redhead seated across from him. Nick was at her back, leaning casually against the closed door.

"I think I may have discovered who's been taking the girls off the streets," Celia told him. "Ryan's given me access to the files I need to proceed. If my hunch is right, Hilary Landry is being held by the same people who've taken so many of the others."

"Have you brought Nick up to speed on this thing?"

"I wasn't aware that you expected me to," she remarked, green eyes wide with startlement.

"He is the officer in charge of the case," Stonetree pointed out with a smile.

Celia nodded, and refrained from the caustic remark that overly polite, near condescending tone would have earned anyone else. She liked Joe Stonetree, and respected him, it cut him a little more slack than most people were ever granted.

"Are you going to be busy for the next hour, Detective?" she asked as she rose and smiled at Nick.

"Apparently," he grinned. "Let's have coffee, and you can explain to me why you were in that parking garage."

* * *

The explanation stalled frequently as Celia picked up a myriad of conflicting impressions from the officer she was talking to. Nick watched her closely, and she had the distinct feeling he was trying to subdue those images before they became clear within her mind.

"Who are you, Nicholas?" she whispered, after a particularly gruesome picture flooded her mind and evoked genuine terror in her.

"You don't really want to know," he assured her, though the worry in his softly accented voice was easily read.

"I think I have to know," she replied softly. "Because what I'm seeing inside my head is scaring the shit out of me, Nicholas."

"Have you always been clairvoyant?"

"No," she shook her head. "It happened after I'd been in an accident that almost killed me. When I woke up, I started to see things that other people couldn't see. After it stopped being so frightening, I learned to make use of it. To help people. At least I hope that's what I do with it."

"Help me find who's taking sixteen-year-olds off the streets," Nick stated quietly, the tone of his voice as much a veiled plea as a request.

"Have you always been this driven, Nicholas?"

"Why do you call me Nicholas when everyone else uses Nick?"

"Because Nicholas is who you really are," she answered after a few moments' thoughtful

consideration. She felt the shudder her statement created in him, and she reached across the table and touched his hand.

That was when she knew what he was, too.

* * *

"You can't be serious, Nicholas?" Celia laughed as she hooked her arm through the handsome detective's and stared up at him. "I've walked the streets of Toronto most of my life, and nothing has happened to me yet!"

"Then you've been lucky," he teased. He stopped beside her car, and she leaned against the shining turquoise Accord. "I mean it, Celia," he continued in a serious tone. "Be careful." He shivered, and was (inappropriately) startled a second later when he realised that she hadn't missed the reaction.

"What is it you're not telling me, Nicholas?"

For a moment, he looked into deep emerald eyes and noted with some surprise that he would have given her an answer -- if he'd had one to offer. In recent weeks he'd begun to feel disturbingly familiar twinges of panic and uneasiness. He'd tried repeatedly to find a reason for the disquiet, but every attempt to reach for the ghostly presence that lurked on the fringes of his awareness was met with frustration. Celia had picked up on the twists and turns of his mood and had offered to help him find what it was that troubled him. He'd declined her offer.

Nick shook off the unpleasant reverie and smiled at her as the summer breeze buffeted them with its gentle warmth. He reached out and ran a hand through the blowing tangle of heavy copper hair, his quiet laughter automatic when she grinned up at him.

"Time to get it cut, isn't it?"

Nick shook his head. "It's beautiful just the way it is," he assured her.

"No wonder Natalie's nuts about you," Celia laughed. "You have the most charming way of making a lady feel lovely, even in the middle of a windstorm!"

Knight shrugged and pulled her into his arms, the hug friendly and warm. Celia had gotten closer to him than he would have preferred, but now that the barriers were down, he was happy to have her in his life. After their first meeting had given her an insight into his existence, he'd been worried. He'd mentioned it to Natalie, and against his protestations, she'd cornered the specialist. Celia had been more amused by Nat's protectiveness than intimidated, and she'd quickly assured them both that she had no intention of discussing Nick.

Stonetree had been so pleased with the results of her impromptu partnership with Knight -- Hilary Landry had been found in far better condition than several other girls -- he'd asked her to stay available to them. She'd gone one better and moved her business from Vancouver to Toronto. She'd just helped them put an end to a ring of white-slavers.

"I think I could get used to this, Nicholas," she said after a few moments. She leaned against him and rested her head on his shoulder. She loved the way this man felt next to her, and despite her very sincere affection for Natalie Lambert, Celia frequently wondered what it would be like to spend a night in Nick's arms.

"You already have," he noted with a low laugh. He held her a little while longer, and

tried to convince himself the feelings he thought he sensed in her were his imagination.

Reluctantly, Celia pulled away from him, and averted her eyes when he tried to meet her gaze. She pulled her car keys from her pocket and concentrated on opening the door. Nick's hand on her arm prevented the escape she suddenly wanted.

"Do we need to talk about anything, Celia?"

"No," she assured him. "I think we understand each other perfectly."

"You don't know what it would be like," he whispered, and answered the longing she felt with the intimate knowledge granted by the strange mental link he never expected to experience with a mortal. "You can't begin to imagine it."

"I know that, Nicholas," she said softly. "But I'm only human," she offered with a self-mocking sigh. "I don't fantasize about dying in your arms, if that's what worries you. But I'm not going to pretend I don't wonder what it would be like to sleep next to you. To make love to you," she confessed with a noticeable tremor in her voice.

With a heartfelt sigh, Nick nodded and kissed her forehead as he pulled her back into his arms. For a long time they simply held each other, both lost in different kinds of loneliness.

* * *

Across the street, hidden in the shadows, he watched them, the darkness no impediment to his preternatural vision. He'd been watching them for weeks. He knew Nicholas had grown close to this human, that he cared for her. He'd grown familiar with all the mortals Nick valued. They each had their place in his careful plan. His interest had been piqued with this woman, she appealed to him as she never would Nick; Knight's heart had been captivated by the other female who claimed so much of his attention. He knew that fact alone could account for the former knight's refusal to act on the desires Celia Hampton harboured for him. Still, Nicholas would be upset if someone else accepted that secret invitation . . . The throb of response between his thighs made him concede how long it had been since he'd satisfied more than his hunger for blood.

He let his eyes drift over the lovely woman as she eased away from Nick. The wind blew open the long coat she wore, and he saw the creamy softness of her sweater, ample curves enticingly revealed. Her short, black leather skirt left a long length of shapely legs on display, and the illusion of height was emphasised by black stiletto heels. She wasn't model thin, and he acquiesced that was part of what made her so attractive. She looked soft and extremely feminine, and he'd already been close enough to feel the depth of her passions. She'd be a more than adequate whore for all his needs. Probably more than the other one would be, when her time came.

LaCroix smiled, the expression an icy shift of pale features. Nick and the woman at his side had both glanced in his direction. The master vampire felt his child's attempt to penetrate the cloak of concealment that shielded his presence. Deflecting Nick's probe required no thought or effort for the ancient vampire, ignoring Celia's search demanded even less energy. She said something to Knight and drew his attention. Minutes later, LaCroix's pleasure deepened as Nicholas stepped back from Celia's car and watched her drive away.

* * *

Nick was almost to the entrance of the 27th Precinct House when he whirled and looked upward. The summer night suddenly felt cold and ominous. Nothing was visible in the blackness of the sky, only the emerging dots of sparkling stars. He shook off the flutter of fear that had intensified within him, then went inside.

* * *

Celia drove mechanically, her thoughts on a course that had very little to do with any destination. She'd made a mistake in transferring her life to this city, and she was only now understanding that fact. She would never have returned to Toronto if she'd foreseen meeting Nicholas Knight. She loved him. Somewhere along the way, without her consciously being aware of it, she'd fallen in love with a vampire.

She laughed, unable to still the rise of bitter mirth. "A bloody vampire!" she whispered in the safe silence of her car. "Of course, it's not bad enough that this gorgeous man is a vampire. He has to be someone a friend of yours loves, too, just to make things that little bit more complicated."

Celia sighed heavily and opened the window as she halted at a red light. The breeze was gradually cooling, and the whisper of chill in the draft of air was soothing. The light turned green and she made a right at the intersection. She didn't want to go home alone, she decided. Not tonight. She'd been alone for months -- ever since she'd met Nicholas. Her body ached with a need that went far beyond sexual tension, and she fought down the surge of pain that centred in her heart when the image of Nick's face teased her mind's eye.

It didn't take her long to find a nightclub that looked like it might offer a reasonable change of pace. She parked her car and climbed out, then stared up at the blinking neon sign: *Scoundrels*. It had the right name, if nothing else.

* * *

"Shit!" Celia resisted the urge to put her head on the polished surface of the bar and pound the gleaming wood in total defeat. "This was not one of your more clever ideas," she muttered to herself.

So far, she'd spent an hour in the club. She'd danced with a couple of men, brushed them off as utter assholes after ten minutes of conversation, and was now faced with the reality of another night alone. The club was going to close before long, and she was just too damn tired and irritable to waste more energy on idiots with IQ's that never rose above December temperatures.

She tossed back the remainder of her drink and the bartender, Keith, approached her, a smile slowly lit his pleasant features.

"Another?" he asked when she placed the empty glass on the bar.

"Why not?" Celia replied with a toss of her head. "This time don't drown the whiskey!"

Keith winked and nodded. When he returned with the drink, she'd already tossed the money on the shining surface. He'd intended to engage her in conversation, but her interest had been captured by someone near the door. He'd worked in enough clubs to recognise the look -- the newcomer had just been tagged as tonight's prize. He scooped up the cash and went back to work as a waitress demanded his service.

Celia felt the change in the air as he walked into the club and stood motionless near the entrance. For several seconds he didn't move, and she allowed her mental probe to reach for him. An immediate, piercing stab of pain inside her head made her wince, and she closed her eyes. When she opened them again, he was headed toward her.

Every movement was graceful and precise, he exuded careless elegance and imperious assurance. He was exactly the kind of man she always hated on sight. Hate was not what she felt now. She crossed her legs, the reaction involuntary as a pulse of heat woke a hunger inside her.

As he neared, she allowed her gaze to wander in appreciative appraisal. He was tall, over six feet, and slender without being too thin. His clothes were midnight black, the combination of form-fitting denim and shimmering silk devastatingly attractive on him. The leather jacket that hung over his shoulders added another intriguing texture to the arresting look. His skin was alabaster white and that paleness was repeated in his hair, the silvery, softly shorn cut made him appear even more imposing. His eyes were deep blue, like the depths of the Caribbean after a summer storm. High cheekbones completed the appearance of regal arrogance that seemed to surround him like a familiar, well worn cloak. She wanted desperately to touch him when he smiled at her.

"I'll take you home," he whispered and leaned on the smooth, shining bartop.

His voice was as superb as the rest of him, Celia thought as a shiver of delight rippled along her spine. The low, intense resonance was like the stroke of rich velvet brushed over hypersensitive skin. She fidgeted on the barstool, her entire body becoming provocatively attuned to his presence.

"I was just getting ready to leave," she answered quietly.

LaCroix slipped her coat over her shoulders, held her back against his chest for the briefest of seconds, then led her to the exit.

* * *

Celia opened her apartment door and gestured for him to go inside. She gave the panel a light push as she followed, and didn't bother to reset the lock. She was shaking, and the reaction was amazing her.

She started to step into the room and walked directly into her guest. Her head rose and whatever apology she intended to make never emerged as his mouth caught hers in a kiss that ignited fire inside her. A voice in her head told her she should protest, but the feel of his body pressing her back against the door was far more beguiling. Long fingers raked through the heavy tangle of her hair and she slid her arms around him when his hips ground into hers with heated urgency.

"I don't even know your name," she gasped into his ear when his mouth began to trail down the side of her neck.

"LaCroix," he murmured. He could feel the erratic pounding of her heart, and the equally intense pulse of life that was tempting him back to her neck. Her hands drifted across his chest and he laughed when her fingers slid lower in a cautious, exploring caress. The sensation her touch evoked was one LaCroix welcomed -- it had been too long, he decided. Instead of killing her at once, he would savour their encounter, and give Nicholas even more pain when the knight discovered her. LaCroix covered her hand with his and pressed her fingers harder against his arousal. Blue eyes captured emerald then he bent to cover her lips with his as he let his hips move into the steady stroke of her massaging hand.

LaCroix loosened his hold long enough to slide the lightweight coat off her shoulders, then he leaned into her and deepened their kiss. Her tongue answered the hungry force of his and she moaned eagerly when his hands glided over her breasts. The soft cashmere of her sweater rippled as he fondled firm flesh with growing pressure. The vampire eased back and stared down into her dazed look.

Celia shivered when he stepped away from her and the expectancy in his sapphire eyes intruded past the fog of euphoria that had enveloped her. She took his hand and drew him down the short corridor that led to her bedroom. She snapped on the bedside lamp, threw back the blankets on her bed, and turned to look at him. Her breath rushed from her in a soft gasp when she watched him toss aside his leather jacket. LaCroix's eyes held hers as he slowly removed his clothes. The flame of hunger in her green gaze was distinctly flattering and he laughed softly when her look worshiped every inch of his body.

As he started to reach for her, she backed away and his eyes narrowed. The tiny flare of irritation vanished when she quickly rid herself of the stylish outfit she'd worn that day. Again, he moved so quickly she was shocked by the swiftness. His weight forced her to the soft mattress and she groaned when his strong form covered hers. Her hands drifted across the broad expanse of his back and she shook her head when he caught her wrists and pinned them to the bed.

"Let me touch you," she begged. The plea was torn from some part of her that she didn't recognise, and it surprised her as much as it clearly amused him.

"And just which part of me is it that you want, my Celia?" LaCroix was enjoying this game, it had been a very long time since he'd dominated anyone's will by pure sexual manipulation.

Celia felt his smooth hardness teasing her excited body and she pressed her hips into his, the invitation unmistakable.

LaCroix laughed and she squirmed in frustration when he refused her. He lowered his mouth to the rosy tip of one full breast and she cried out in startled pleasure when he bit softly. He felt the attempt she made to free her hands and he tightened his grip. The whimper that slipped from her a second later was equal parts pain and delight when he held the firm nipple between his teeth and caressed the turgid tip with his tongue. His fangs began to extend and he pulled back and watched her writhe as he forced his body to a control that had been his for centuries. Then he lowered his head to her other breast and leisurely repeated the erotic torture.

He finally released her hands and she immediately slid from under him and pushed him onto his back. LaCroix's breath escaped in a startled hiss when her mouth descended on him and her tongue began to tease and stroke. Her lips and hands were everywhere as she caressed and explored the well defined contours of his body. Her enthusiasm to please him was intriguing and he basked in the wash of carnal pleasure her touch incited. LaCroix closed his eyes so she wouldn't see the betraying glow of golden fire that he felt replacing pale blue. When she climbed across his hips and started to lower herself onto him, he grasped her waist and reversed their positions.

"Please?" Celia cried, her voice a choked plea of longing.

LaCroix ignored her and turned his attention to taunting and teasing her into an even more intense state of arousal. His fingers drifted over flushed, heated skin that felt like silk. Waves of heavy copper hair streamed over the light gold of the satiny sheets beneath them and he rose on his elbows to look down into her fiery emerald gaze. His tongue traced the fullness of her bottom lip before slipping into the warmth of her mouth. His lips crushed hers with the sudden force of his hunger and he allowed the passion to expand and consume him.

"Tell me you love me," he whispered when he drew back. He wanted her submission to be total, he wanted to own her soul before he claimed her life.

"I want you, LaCroix!" Celia gasped, beyond caring what he said to her.

"You love me, Celia," he repeated, and let his hips move against her in a tantalising undulation. She moaned softly. She loved what he was doing to her, of that there was no doubt. LaCroix demanded more than her sexual capitulation.

Celia twisted and wrapped her legs around his waist as she tried to pull him into the intimate union she desperately needed. She felt the resistance in his body and cried out when he hauled her arms up over her head. She stretched into an arch that was both pain and pleasure as she writhed under him. Indigo eyes snared hers and he smiled.

The glimpse into his mind was so unexpected it momentarily shocked her out of the heated lust that had devoured her. His low laughter was chilling, and terrifying in its sensuality. He was like Nicholas. She was making love with a vampire. LaCroix. Dear God! It could not be the LaCroix of which Nicholas spoke? His...

". . . Master," she breathed as tears blurred her vision.

LaCroix heard the breath of sound and his smile grew soft with satisfaction. He was poised over her, the smooth, rigid length of him against the weeping entrance to her body. He thrust into her with a suddenness that drew a choked groan from her. The wet heat of her body surrounded him and LaCroix began to move within her, his passion roused to the same profound lust as his hunger.

The stroke of his hips was hard and his possession complete. Celia's body answered his rhythm with the same driving intensity he had claimed her with, and she opened her eyes to stare into the fierce beauty of his face. His eyes glowed into hers and she shuddered, the response as much ecstatic with pleasure as it was filled with fascination. She'd never felt like this with any man she'd ever touched. She could have adored LaCroix with very little struggle. If it hadn't been for . . .

"Say it, my Celia?" LaCroix growled as his head lowered to her neck. He felt the

shudders of her body lost in the delirium of orgasm and knew his own climax was nearing.

Celia bit his shoulder as his hips drove into her and her body exploded with rapture. Is this what it would have been like with him? Would Nicholas have taken her to this insane level of fulfillment? Would he have demanded that she relinquish her soul? She no longer cared.

"I love you . . . LaCroix . . ." She moaned in agonised elation when LaCroix's fangs sank into her throat. In some macabre surrender to his power, Celia tilted her head back and wrapped her arms around the ancient vampire as he freed her hands. His name slipped from her lips repeatedly as she melted into the bed beneath him. The spasm of his release left her trembling as he drank her life from her.

* * *

The call had come in just after nine, and Nick felt his stomach knot into tighter coils within him as he climbed the stairs that would take him to Celia's fifth floor apartment. Schanke had taken the elevator. Nick needed the extra time to order his thoughts into something that didn't border quite so closely on outright panic.

He felt the familiar tremor of power as soon as he stepped into the flat. Celia's coat was discarded on the floor just inside the entrance, and he bent to touch the light fabric. He pulled his hand back instantly.

"Hey, something wrong, partner?" Schanke asked when he entered the living room in time to see Nick flinch away from the coat.

Knight pulled himself together and stood. He shook his head and reached out to the very air of the apartment. Laughter poured into his mind. Demented, horrifying madness tainted the sound and he resisted the desire to turn and leave.

"Nick? What is it, buddy?" Schanke was genuinely concerned, and he took a step closer to his partner. Sometimes, Nick was spooky to be around. Like the dead woman in the next room had been.

"Where is she?" Knight asked softly.

Schanke shifted uncomfortably. "You don't have to -- "

"Yeah, Schank, I do," Nick interrupted.

"The bedroom," Schanke told him. He caught Nick's arm as he started to pass, and the other man's sharp blue eyes bored into him. "She's in rough shape, Nick. Looks like her neck's been broken."

"Is Natalie on her way over?"

Schanke shook his head. "She'll meet them at the morgue. It was supposed to be her night off," he added.

Nick patted his partner's shoulder and headed down the short hallway. Each step closer to the room strengthened his wish to turn away, but he forced himself to enter the shadowy bedroom.

The atmosphere was unnaturally still, even with the presence of the Forensic team. Nick felt the iciness of death in the room, but layered beneath that chill was heat. He let his mental exploration delve deeper and a spasm of burning sensuality wrenched his body. The hunger he

felt in that second of contact left him shaking as he made a grab for the edge of a chest of drawers. He recovered quickly and continued toward the bed.

Knight stared down at her and again the remnant of savage lust tweaked at his consciousness. Celia's face held no trace of revulsion, only obscene pleasure. The punctures at her throat assured Nick she'd been taken by another of his kind. He'd known her mood the previous night, why hadn't he taken her home when he sensed the danger that had been so near to them?

"I'm sorry, Nick."

Schanke's voice was quiet, but the sincerity brought a sad smile to Nick's features when he nodded at his friend.

"There's a note, Detective Knight," one of the Forensic people held up a plain white envelope. "It's addressed to you."

Shutting out the sense of horror that was mushrooming inside him, Nick accepted the missive then almost dropped it when his hand began to shake. He didn't open the envelope. Instead, he crossed to the bed and dropped to his knees next to it. His right hand caressed a gentle touch across Celia's forehead, and pain erupted within his mind. LaCroix's face, cruelly beautiful in the throes of desire, filled his vision. She had been with LaCroix!

Nick shook his head and fell back against the nightstand. It couldn't be! He had destroyed the ancient vampire a year ago. His master had died in the inferno of Nick's crumbling loft, impaled on a flaming spear that Nick himself had buried in LaCroix's chest. He allowed his mind to glimpse the memories imprinted within the room's aura. Celia's awe struck him first, then her hunger for LaCroix as the master vampire stood before her. No one could have exerted the sheer inexorable power that defined LaCroix -- it had to be LaCroix himself, not another vampire.

"Can we take the body, Detective?"

When Nick remained silent, Schanke nodded and the room was quickly emptied of people. Only Knight and his partner were left in the silence.

"Give me a minute alone, Schank," Nick requested.

Don hesitated, then he left his friend. He didn't pretend to understand the uncharacteristic behaviour he'd witnessed tonight. But, he had known how close Knight and Celia Hampton had become. He might have been a little bit off balance himself if this had been a good friend of his.

* * *

Nick looked down at the envelope he held, and his teeth clenched when he saw the familiar, centuries old script of his master's handwriting. Subduing the burst of anger that knifed through him, Nick opened the envelope, removed the single page of paper and read. The message was simple: *Requiescant In Pace* -- May they rest in peace.

The meaning was equally clear -- LaCroix's vengeance had only begun . . .

THE EASY LIFE

by: *Lorraine Duffield*

Life's little disappointments
 lying people over due rent
bury me in frustration
 be the master of my destiny
make me as you are
 so the little things
can be littler.

What are your major concerns
 sunlight, garlic, wooden stakes
if only life could be simple
 would that we could change places
if only for a night.

A night of aerial flights
 sharp teeth, glowing eyes
the ability to make people tell the truth
 pure fantasy come to life
perhaps I would take you for my own.

So I could be the master of your destiny
 your will bent to mine
my desires yours to fulfill
 mutual pleasure entwined in shuddering release
an impossible fantasy.

Too impossible for me to trust
 that one starless night
you might be there
 bringing your own light
shining red in tiny pin points
 boring into my very soul.

Fear suspended

I would wait, breathless
hoping, praying for the bite
nipped ever so gently into my neck
the lifeline from me to you
endless seconds, drawn into eternity.

Instead, I am mired in the mundane
mucked over with life's garbage
wishing for a life of darkened shadows
in which the overriding obsession
is the bloody thread which links us all.

No guilt as you kill
no regrets as you feed
no remorse tears your conscience to threads
nothing but your urges
so easy
all of it
so easy.

WE ARE NOT ALONE IN THE NIGHT

by: *Lorraine Duffield*

LaCroix tapped a fingernail against his teeth. Had he ever in all his 2000 years been so bored? It was enough to make a vampire want to walk into the sun. Of course he wouldn't -- Lucien LaCroix had done many things during his long stretch of eternity, few of his actions had been deliberately foolish. And foolish it would be to survive fire and stake through the heart, only to succumb to the crush of too many years carelessly lived.

It often crossed his mind to wonder at the purpose of it all. Then reality would set in, there was no higher purpose to anything. No Divine plan guided the destinies of anyone. Only simple, blind fate.

Humans needed to believe there was some form of order to their lives. Probably because if they truly believed that life was nothing more than a string of events with no reason, plan, or ordination, they would realize the smallness, the infinitesimal nothingness of each of them. Something he knew full well, since he had been snuffing out individual human existences for centuries. The earth didn't stop rotating on its axis when he took a victim. No thunder claps crashed. His victims simply were -- and then they were not.

All of these things he believed with a singular conviction. Although, occasionally it would cross his mind, what about him? Or the creatures like him. They had been ordinary humans transformed into an almost demigod status. They lived forever, with a few strict, but deadly rules.

They could fly, hypnotize people, drink blood and perform acts of great strength. So, if magic existed for them, in what guises did it exist for others?

Was there some subtle attraction for being human which had eluded him? He shrugged. It no longer mattered, he was what he had become. No amount of speculation would change that fact. Not now, not ever. He accepted that. Would that certain others of his acquaintance only accept that fact.

Speak of the devil.

There was Mr. Angst himself. He wore a suitably somber expression. One that narrowed to near annoyance at the sight of him. Such impertinence!

"Nicholas, what a pleasure. Dare I hope you are looking for a hunting companion this fine summer eve?"

Nicholas' expression altered to resemble that of one who had just eaten a particularly sour pickle. How predictable. Even their little spats had a certain, 'I stab you, you stab me,' flavor to them. He stifled a yawn. If there was a god, he beseeched, please grant me at least one interesting evening.

Nick's mouth stopped in mid-quip, his eyes widening in disbelief. Over to the west, the night sky brightened for a split second, then was black once again. Nick grabbed LaCroix by the coat sleeve, to startled to notice that his irritated companion merely jerked his arm away and straightened the fabric in clear annoyance.

"Look," Nicholas urged.

LaCroix turned and looked, just as the sky brightened once again and grew dark. Without hesitation, they took to the night in the direction of the silent disturbance. As they flew toward the area, there was another flash. They were close enough that it momentarily blinded them.

Nick and LaCroix clutched at each other, trying to keep their bearings and not tumble head over heels. It was when they still had hold of each other that they saw it. A low flat shape, half sticking out of the ground. It was a wonder they hadn't heard a crash.

They cautiously approached the thing. It soon became apparent why the ground hadn't been shaken. It had not struck the surface of the earth, it had **blended** with it. Without a thought to radiation or other such nonsense, they watched the alien craft try to back itself out of a ditch. It was obvious they needed to succeed soon, before any official visitors made an unwanted visit. After a couple of pulsing attempts a door opened up in the thing. A tiny being with a large head and '*I Dream Of Jeannie*' eyes emerged. It didn't acknowledge the presence of the two vampires, but rapped out a series of high pitched syllabic noises. With amusement, LaCroix realized that the small creature was cursing.

Of all things to be universal, it seemed ironic that impatience and ill manners would be two of them. The small creature was joined by a second being of similar height. Add another trait, the ability to be argumentative. LaCroix permitted himself a small snort of derision. Nick hit him on the shoulder to indicate the need for discretion.

Too late, they had attracted the attention of their alien friends. They were approached with caution. The aliens moved slowly, bobbing their heads and appearing to the two vampires, submissive. In a few short seconds, the four humanoids faced each other.

"Welcome to our planet," Nick said, enunciating each word slowly.

"Good job, Nicholas. Slow speech is a sure fire universal translator," LaCroix mocked.

Nick looked at him with exasperation. He opened his mouth in another attempt to communicate. However, with sudden, swift sureness, the aliens grabbed them. Their grips were astonishingly strong and more than sufficient to restrain them. They were too shocked to feel any fear. But they were surprised when the faces of the aliens underwent a familiar transformation and the two vampires were looking at glowing red eyes and long pointed teeth.

Not to be out-done, LaCroix and his protégé responded in kind, hissing at the beings who imprisoned them in their iron-like embraces.

The aliens jabbered together angrily, indicating, with dips of their heads, the men they controlled. One gave a final retort, and without warning, buried his fangs into LaCroix's neck. After a second of hesitation, the other one did the same. For the Earth vampires, the sensation was like a pair of red hot poker being stabbed into their flesh. Unable to control it, they both screamed in agony.

Almost as fast as it had happened, it was over and they were looking up into the faces

of their captors. The aliens didn't look happy or sated. If anything, they looked a little green, which was not their previous color.

"Left a bad taste in your mouth, did we?" LaCroix drawled in amusement. "Good," he added in supreme satisfaction.

The alien holding him released his grip and staggered away, clutching his stomach. The same went for Nick's captor, who actually sank to his knees, his face filled with the horrendous pain he was experiencing.

"What are you doing?" LaCroix asked Nick, who had knelt to assist the alien in front of him to his feet. The creature bared his fangs at him and hissed. Nick released it in time to allow it to lurch away and retch up the blood he'd consumed. As did his companion.

"I just hate it when people can't hold their drink," LaCroix mocked.

The aliens straightened to face the earthling vampires, who wore their usual facial expressions, sad compassion and mocking superiority. (*It's not too much of a stretch to guess which description fits whom.*)

The alien who had bitten LaCroix held a hand up in front of Nick, and then reached up with the other hand and gashed a fingertip with a long curving nail. The blood which ran freely, was red, just like theirs. He offered the blood to Nick, who declined.

"Thank you, but no, I don't feel like throwing up right now. If you don't mind." He spoke in a friendly fashion, with a smile on his lips.

The alien threw out his arm in an all encompassing gesture, indicating the city of Toronto spread out before them. He squeezed his finger, blood dripping to the ground. Nick was mystified. LaCroix, however had an inkling as to what they were being asked. He faced the creature and then patted himself on the chest, and then Nick. He grabbed Nick, who protested weakly, and bit him on the neck.

"Hey, I don't think I've got a whole lot of blood left, you know," Nick complained, indignant. LaCroix silenced him with a warning squeeze. Catching on, Nick went limp. His master let his body drop to the ground with a thud, and nudged him with his foot. Nick played possum.

The aliens contemplated him with disgust. Not over his actions, but what it meant. This was a planet of vampires forced to feed upon their own kind. The blood here was nasty and dead. Not at all suitable for these alien visitors who sought an abundant food source. Chattering miserably between them, they turned and reentered their craft. After a moment, they returned with a box. Opening it, they displayed its grisly contents: the heads of several alien species. Bowing, they presented it to the two earthlings. Then backed away, still bowing until they reached their ship, which they then boarded.

After a moment, the door shut. Nick and LaCroix quickly retreated to safety and watched as the alien ship fired up and disengaged itself from the rocky soil. It then disappeared in a flash, gone instantly, never to return.

Nick clung to LaCroix's shoulder, his knees feeling rubbery and unable to support him.

"Did you have to take so much blood?" he asked weakly.

LaCroix, however, had an answer for everything. "I had to make it look good." Spying a large shape moving in the distance, he picked up Nick, and flew to where a cow stood

grazing. The creature was too stupid to run. It chewed a mouthful of grass, it's indifferent stare sliding over LaCroix and his burden, then moving on.

"No wonder there are so many hamburgers in this country," the older vampire commented in disgust, shifting Nick within his grasp. "Dinner's ready, Nicholas." He set Nick on his feet.

Nick lurched over to the cow and bit it several times, trying to find an artery. By the time he found one, the dumb beast decided she didn't like this little party and attempted to run away. She was held fast by LaCroix and Nick, whose strength was returning quickly. He finished while the cow still lived, giving LaCroix a turn to slake his thirst. With some difficulty, he managed to break the bovine's spine. The last thing they needed was a vampire cow mooing its way across the countryside. The imagined sight struck the 2000 year old vampire in a really silly way. Especially when the fantasy expanded and his mind's eye saw the cow flying in the air and swooping in on its innocent victims. Or Farmer Fred trying to milk Bossy, only to find himself the one being milked.

No, that wouldn't do at all. He chortled in amusement, the ridiculous thought almost erasing the dreadful taste of cow on his taste buds.

Nick looked at his old master as if he had finally taken leave of his senses.

"Care to share the joke?"

LaCroix shook his head, some silly thoughts are too silly to be shared. Especially when one has a reputation to maintain.

"You know LaCroix, you're a hero," Nick began. LaCroix's brow shot up in astonishment. Heedless, Nick continued, "You saved the world, and the humans in it."

"Don't get all warm and fuzzy on me, Nicholas." LaCroix straightened his clothing, his every movement haughty. "I was merely protecting the blood supply."

Nick watched him with a disbelieving expression. LaCroix sighed.

"Okay, so I would miss them if they weren't here. Before everything went nuts tonight, I was wondering if there was some attraction to being human that I wasn't aware of. I can only conclude that it is this, they are alive. Without them, we would be in the same boat as those aliens." He leaped into the air and called down to Nick. "Vampires cannot live by cow alone." He hovered momentarily above Nick. "And for God's sake, bury that." He indicated the aliens' present.

As LaCroix flew away, he heard Nick call out to him.

"Who died and made you Emperor of China?"

"I did," LaCroix replied flippantly, far enough away now that Nick barely heard him.

Well, LaCroix reflected. His request had been granted. Tonight had certainly not been boring. He flew toward the moon.

Nick, on the ground below, watched until LaCroix was a speck against the heaven bound orb.

All around him, Nick heard the heartbeats of sleepy humans, who had no idea of the disaster which had been narrowly averted. With a sigh, he picked up the box.

BACK WITH A VENGEANCE

by: Wolfe-Heart

Editor's Note:

For those of you who haven't encountered Wolfe-Heart's misguided vampire, Ford Peterson, before now, the premise is pretty straightforward. He's a mistake LaCroix made about 250 years back, in a fit of pique, of course -- and Ford returns periodically to aggravate the Master he adores. Ford is totally inept, and definitely not cut out for vampiric existence, so it's hard to say who you'll feel sorrier for, Peterson, or LaCroix!

* * * * *

To put it bluntly, it was a miserable night.

The tail end of the latest hurricane from off the coast was having its final say before it died down on the city. The wild winds and rain were causing the usual power outages, flooding, and more than its usual problems for local authorities. Nicholas Knight was one of those local authorities who just happened to be working this night. As he sat huddled in his car, trying to see past the rain teaming on down on his windshield, his car radio sounded.

Nicholas moaned. The last thing he wanted to do on a night like this was investigate anything that had to do with outdoors. Sure enough, as the dispatcher finished relaying the message, Nicholas sighed. A body had been found in the alley not far from his location. Nick cursed as he put the car in gear and headed toward Ninth Street.

It wasn't difficult to find the scene. Already the alley was alive with the usual crowd. The Coroner was just pulling up when Nick arrived. As Nick got out of the car, a gust of wind raced across the alley grabbing at Natalie's coat, hauling it half off.

"Lovely night," grumbled Nat.

"Yeah, just lovely," said Nick. "Do you know what we've got here?" he asked to no one in particular.

As Nick surveyed the scene, his senses grew ever more alert. Something felt familiar about this, it had a certain . . . Nick wasn't sure exactly what it was, and quite frankly, given the current weather, he wasn't about to take the time to figure it out.

By the time Nick reached the body, he was soaked through to the bone. He began to feel a chill, which of course was unusual in itself. Nick finally turned his attention to the body lying

in a pool of coloured water.

"I can't figure out a damn thing in this weather! Just pack it up and ship it down to the morgue," snorted the Coroner. She turned to Nick, "Whoever did this though, wasn't very good at his job, it's a bloody mess, if you'll pardon the pun."

Nick reached down for a closer look at the body, but as the rain came streaming down he thought better of it. The Coroner was right, of course, if someone wanted to make a point by slicing the guy's neck, he, or she, certainly didn't have the slightest clue how to do it. Nick didn't waste much time at the scene, instead he walked around to a couple of the uniforms and asked them if they'd send him their reports. All were more than happy to cooperate, anything to get out of the weather. Nick decided to head directly to Natalie's office.

* * *

Across town the mood wasn't much better inside The Raven. LaCroix heard nothing but complaints while mingling with his clients, and to be perfectly candid, he was getting pissed off. Although the night club had more than the average number of clients for a night like this, most had only come in to get out of the rain. Precious little cash was flowing. The only source of entertainment was coming from the big screen TV.

"Hey, turn up the news, will ya?" someone shouted from across the floor.

LaCroix turned his attention in the direction of the voice, then the TV. A perky little reporter was on screen, in front of an obvious crime scene. As he tuned in he heard the reporter's commentary.

"So far, the police have found nothing to go on. This reporter has found out however, through her sources, that a body of a yet unnamed man in his mid-twenties was found just after 1 A.M.

"He is said to have been dead for only a short time. It should be noted, for the record, that his neck was butchered. It is speculated that the murder is some form of satanic cult ritual . . ."

LaCroix turned the volume down. Another murder, so what. He caught a fleeting glimpse of Nick as he was getting into his car. LaCroix sneered.

LaCroix turned his attention back to the bar. He was looking about at the grim faces, and considering that things couldn't get any worse -- when they did. Ford Peterson walked through the doors. The mood in the bar shifted from sour to down-right miserable. LaCroix cocked an eyebrow as Ford called out to the bar, "Hello, everyone!", in an all too upbeat tone. It was just too much for most of the patrons. The only thing worse than a hurricane, the only other thing that could drive a vampire out into weather like this was -- Ford.

Ford, of course, was completely oblivious to the atmosphere, the looks, the stream of people rushing past him. Ford waved to each of them.

LaCroix, on the other hand, was not delighted to say the least. He watched as Ford made his way to the bar, and jumped up on a barstool. The only redeeming factor about the night was going to be his radio show, which as he looked at his watch, was due to be on the air very shortly. LaCroix decided to avoid Ford altogether, and just head into his private studio.

* * *

It was very early morning when Nick finally made his way to the Morgue. As he continued, dripping down the hall, his senses were still tingling. Wringing out his hands as he pushed his way through the doors, he spotted Natalie peering over the body.

"So, how's about this weather?" she quipped as Nick came up behind her.

"I already had a shower, and I don't generally work hard enough to require two in one day," smiled Nick.

Natalie returned the look and continued to work.

"Have anything for me?" Nick wondered as he watched her.

Nat's shoulders hunched as Nick finished the question.

"You know something, don't you?" Nick enquired.

"I know quite a lot, it might even surprise you what I know," snapped the pretty coroner.

"Hey, what's up?" Nick asked as he gently took Nat by the shoulders and turned her around to face him.

Nat looked bleak. She wasn't quite sure how to start.

Nick looked into her eyes and read the conflict. "Okay, you do, out with it."

Nat pressed her lips together and proceeded to remove her gloves and jacket. "It's like this, Nick." She paused. "How do I put this? If I didn't know that **you** actually existed, I'd say that one of your buddies wasn't having a good night." She waited for a response.

"What do you mean, one of my buddies?"

"It looks like someone, or something, tried to bite this guy's neck off, and was interrupted. Or, just didn't know what it was doing. It's the worst butchering job I've ever seen."

Natalie watched Nick's face go through many emotions, none of which she could register clearly. He walked over and peered intently at the body. All his internal alarms seemed to have been activated when he looked back at Natalie.

"Don't say anything about your theory," he warned.

Nat was so taken aback by the near threat of his tone, she simply nodded in acquiescence. Before she could reply more vocally, he was gone.

Nick was headed for the only other person he could confide in about a matter of this magnitude. He'd have to hurry, though, LaCroix was due to go on the air any minute now.

As Nick's car sped down the road, he cursed. He cursed himself, but more so he cursed LaCroix. The thought of another vampire loose in the city was just too much for Nick to handle. If anybody knew who it was, LaCroix would have the best clue.

* * *

Meanwhile, back at The Raven, Ford's usual charm was having its usual effect. The place had gone from a room full of pitiful clientele to a room with a pitiful clientele. As Ford looked around at the now desolated bar, he yelled across to the bartender, "Hey, where did everyone go, I just got here?"

"You just answered your own question," the man snarled back.

"Hey, since there's no one here, why not tune in The Night Crawler, and see what's happening. That's my favourite show, don't ya know?" beamed Ford.

The bartender mumbled something to himself. Ford couldn't quite hear, but the man did as he was told. Ford ordered a Cherry Coke and proceeded to perch himself near a speaker so he could listen to the show.

As the smooth, rich baritone voice filtered through the empty bar, a few blocks away, Nick switched on his radio to tune in the same show.

"Damn! He's on the air already. I'll have to speak to him later."

Instead of pulling into the lot outside The Raven, Nick decided to call it a night and head home.

* * *

Nick felt a lot better after his second shower and a bottle of blood. The weather outside was still as miserable as his mood, but the sustenance and comfort did help. Nick wrapped himself in his favourite robe and stretched out on the soft leather sofa to listen to the radio show. As he listened to the voice that filled the air waves, and so much of his life, his eyes scanned the whirling scene outside the loft windows. Nat's words were sitting uneasily with Nick, and he knew the upcoming conversation with LaCroix wasn't going to be a picnic either. He sighed. The thought of one of them on the loose in the city . . .

It was much later when he heard the cutting edge to The Night Crawler's voice, and his attention was jerked back to the radio show.

"Yeah, I'm just calling about that killing tonight on Ninth Street," said the caller.

"Yes," LaCroix replied, bored. "What about it?"

"Yeah, well, man, ya know I don't believe in ghosts and spooks, and stuff like that, but shit, man, that guy's neck was butchered!"

"And," purred The Night Crawler. "Your point?"

"Hey, you believe in vampire's don't ya? Like, I think, maybe, the murder was, ya know, a nut case. Some guy who thought he was a vampire, a 'Prince of the Night'," continued the caller.

Nick bolted upright. He could sense the change in the voice, even before LaCroix replied.

"What makes you think it was a vampire?"

"I overheard the morgue people talking," said the caller. "Just too weird for me, man. Anyway, like I gotta go now and get another brew. You're really cool, man, really cool." The caller hung up the phone.

Nick held his breath as he waited for the response to the caller from the radio host. A thousand things ran through Nick's mind, yet he couldn't verbalize one of them just then.

The Night Crawler's voice came back on the air. "Well, that's an interesting possibility, isn't it? A vampire loose in the city. Rather frightening, don't you think? Ah, another caller,

let's see what this one has to say. Do you have something to add to this topic?"

"Hello, hello -- "

"Yes, you're on the air."

"Hello. I did it," said the new caller, proudly.

"Did what?"

"That guy you were just talking about, I did it," said the voice again in an all too smug tone.

"Precisely what did you do?"

"Like, I'm a really big fan of the show, ya know. And, well, you're as close to a hero as I'll ever have," said the caller.

"Oh?"

Nick could see the quirk of LaCroix's eyebrow when that statement was made.

"Why don't you tell me what it is you think you've done?" suggested The Night Crawler.

"I did like I was told, and I think I've got it right. I must have or else there wouldn't be all this fuss."

"Fuss? You call this fuss? By what name can I address you?" asked LaCroix.

"Oh, everyone just calls me Ford," chirped the caller.

Nick fell back to the couch. "Ford Peterson!"

Nick flew into his bedroom, hauled on the first things he could find, and headed back into the night.

* * *

For the first time in the history of The Night Crawler's radio show, listeners actually heard the host choke. LaCroix was beside himself when he realized that not only was the murder linked to vampires, but that Ford Peterson, (but who else), was actually admitting to it on the air.

"Ford? Ford. Ford!" roared LaCroix.

"That's me," chirped back the little voice.

LaCroix was too dumbfounded to reply.

The dead air said it all.

Seconds later, Ford piped up.

"Are you still there?"

"Oh yes . . ." replied The Night Crawler.

"You don't sound happy about my, well, my encounter. Here I thought you of all people would be thrilled for me."

"Happy? Happy . . . why you little . . ." LaCroix let the unfinished sentence hang.

"Gee, I guess I didn't do it right after all. I was trying so hard, too. I read the manual and everything," sighed Ford.

The Night Crawler snapped back to attention. "What manual?"

"Damn!" said Ford. "I guess I'll have to try again," he murmured in a sad voice. He paused for a second then in a much brighter tone added, "You know the old saying, if at first

you don't succeed, try, try again. Bye now," Ford hung up the phone.

Fortunately for The Night Crawler, his air time was mercifully up, too. His senses were on fire as he explained the latest "nut" to call into the show. He knew most of his regulars would laugh Ford off, regardless. But, to The Night Crawler, this was no laughing matter. He was fuming, simply fuming. As he finished his show and stormed out of the control room, it dawned on him that Ford was in the bar.

"Where is he?" LaCroix snarled.

"Where's who?" asked the bartender.

"Ford."

"Oh, that nut is long gone. He flew outta here awhile back. Kept mumbling to himself something like 'I think I can, I think I can'. The guy's a nut," said the bartender.

It would be the last words he ever spoke, LaCroix, in a fit of pique, snapped the guy's neck.

* * *

It was shortly after three when Nick came into The Raven. He saw the limp body on the floor next to the bar and it didn't take the detective long to guess what happened.

"I will kill him," LaCroix smouldered. "I will take his stupid neck and break it in two."

Nick was still looking at the body. LaCroix glanced at him.

"So," the ancient vampire snapped defiantly.

"Something will have to be done with the body, LaCroix, you can't just leave it here."

LaCroix kicked the body and went to sit at the nearest table. His mood softened slightly and he looked at Nick.

"What are we going to do with him?"

Nick was at a total loss and shrugged his shoulders.

"That was helpful," LaCroix remarked snidely. "Do you have any idea what The Enforcers are going to say about this?"

"I don't even want to think that far ahead. Right now our biggest problem is what to do about Ford," Nick griped. "I think he's going to try again."

"Do you have any idea what the hell he was talking about when he said 'The Manual'?"

Nick grimaced.

"Nicholas!" hissed LaCroix when the younger vampire refused to answer him. "What do you know about The Manual?"

In reality, Nick had forgotten all about the book LaCroix was fuming over.

"Hindsight," Nicholas laughed softly. "What a wonderful thing to possess."

LaCroix was not near as amused as Nick. His eyebrows rose. Nick sighed.

"You remember a while back, about a century ago actually, Ford had found us and he was in a such a pitiful state --"

"When is he not?" LaCroix interjected quietly.

"Anyway, well, he was bemoaning his fate yet again, and well, I felt sorry for him and told him to read this."

"The Manual, Nicholas, what about it?"

Nick fidgeted. "I gave him a copy of a new book, just out, and told him to read it." When LaCroix's eyes bored into him, he gave up the title. "It was *Bram Stoker's DRACULA*," he confessed.

LaCroix's brows knotted.

"I didn't think it would hurt, there's nothing in it but a bunch of stupid shit and stuff," Nick said in his own defense.

LaCroix leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. Within moments, Nick saw LaCroix's body begin to shake. He stood frozen for a few minutes, and it wasn't until LaCroix's laughter became audible that Nick relaxed.

"LaCroix?"

LaCroix, still laughing, got up from the table and approached Nick. He put his arm around Knight's neck and started to choke him.

"You fool! How could you be so stupid? Especially when it comes to Ford."

"LaCroix . . ." croaked Nick as his hands went up to try to free himself of the hold. Just as suddenly as LaCroix had grabbed Nick, he let him go. LaCroix was measuring his errant son's sincerity. He knew Nick had meant no harm, as usual it was Ford who had misread. As LaCroix released Nick, Knight slumped to the floor. LaCroix looked down at him for a second, then bent to speak to him.

"So, tell me, mon garçon, just what do you propose we do to stop him now?"

Nick could only shake his head. "Find him?" was all he managed to offer.

"Well, that shouldn't be too difficult," LaCroix answered with a smile.

* * *

LaCroix was right. It didn't take long to find Ford.

LaCroix and Nick simply stepped outside, and searched with their combined thoughts. Ford was never far away from what he considered home base, and The Raven was Ford's base.

The pair only had to walk a few blocks from The Raven to find who they were looking for. And, true to his form, there was Peterson, as pitiful as ever, trying to pick up a hooker.

"Hey, babe, wanna fa -- " Ford never completed the sentence.

"Ford, you moron," Nick shouted.

"Nicholas, Nicholas, is that really you?" Ford immediately dropped his pitch to the hooker, and ran gleefully to Nick and LaCroix.

"But, this can't be," said Ford. "No, but yes, it can be. You brought The Master along with you. My, what an honour." And, in typical Ford fashion, he bowed low before LaCroix.

LaCroix was about to reach out and snap Ford's neck, but Nick grabbed his arm and prevented it.

"It wouldn't do any good, he'd only come back with a vengeance," sighed Nick.

It was about this time that Nick spared himself a few seconds to review the situation. Nick, still keeping a firm grip on LaCroix's arm, looked from one face to the other. Ford remained totally oblivious to life in general, and LaCroix on the brink of murder. Nick began

to laugh.

"I fail to see, young knight, what you find so humourous about this," sneered LaCroix. Nick laughed harder.

"Nicholas, it is so good to see you again after all this time. Come, we must get out of this weather and have a nice long chat," cooed Ford. Ford took Nick by the arm and began to lead him nowhere in particular.

"Come along, LaCroix," said Ford, "don't be shy."

Nick tried very hard not to snicker, but it was extremely difficult, especially when LaCroix glowered at him in impotent fury.

* * *

The trio made their way back to The Raven. It was getting close to daylight and LaCroix was not in a better frame of mind upon their return. Nick was just about to launch into a conversation with Ford about what to do and not to do, when LaCroix, having had enough, whirled the stool that Ford was sitting on around and confronted him.

"You pissy little vampire," sneered LaCroix.

Nick was stunned, he had never heard LaCroix use the term 'pissy' before. Then again, when it came to Ford, most things normal didn't occur.

"I beg your pardon, Master," stammered Ford. "Have I upset you?"

"Upset me!?" roared LaCroix.

At this point, LaCroix lifted Ford off the stool. Nick decided to intervene on Ford's behalf, even though he felt like doing the same thing.

"LaCroix," Nick cut in, "he doesn't know, he doesn't understand."

LaCroix, still holding Ford aloft, peered into the inept mind. It only took seconds to discern that Nick was correct. Ford had no idea what he did or didn't do. LaCroix put him back on the stool, none too gently. LaCroix turned his back to Ford and Nick, then started to pace The Raven. He waved a hand at Nick and said, "Handle it, you don't have much time."

Nick wasn't entirely sure how or where to begin. He scanned Ford's mind for a starting point, and discovered it was, unfortunately, quite empty.

"I guess I did it wrong, huh?" Ford said in a child-like tone.

"Ford, you just can't go around killing people," sighed Nick.

"But I thought we, (he put special emphasis on the 'we'), were supposed to?"

LaCroix's head jerked up with such a sudden motion that Nick and Ford were silenced immediately. Nick looked over at LaCroix and shook his head.

"Oh, shit!" was all LaCroix had time to mutter before the door of The Raven flew inward and three Enforcers materialized.

"Always a pleasure to see you again, LaCroix," the senior of the new trio commented.

"Like-wise," LaCroix nodded.

"This isn't good," said Ford.

Everyone turned to look at him.

"As always, Mr. Peterson, you manage to understate the obvious," said another of the

Enforcers.

Nick was about to come to Ford's aid when the senior Enforcer held up his hand.

"Don't even bother."

Nick started to protest a second time, but LaCroix shot him a look that quickly silenced him.

"What are you going to do with him?" LaCroix asked.

"Like you care," said the third Enforcer.

LaCroix took this as a direct personal assault and approached the third man.

"I was simply asking out of curiosity," he noted.

"Well, you know what happened to the cat," smiled the third man.

"Enough," interrupted the first Enforcer. "You, with me, now." He pointed to Ford.

Ford shrank back, looked toward Nick, then LaCroix. He knew there was nothing either could do. He slowly got up to meet his fate.

"Parting is such sweet sorrow," Ford said as he passed LaCroix. He also stopped long enough to kiss the master vampire's hand, which went over really big with LaCroix.

Nick couldn't even smile when LaCroix looked disdainfully at his hand. As they were about to leave, Nick heard Ford say, "What? You really mean it? Oh, wow, I mean, Oh, boy! Me? Really? I just can't believe it, I'm going to school." Ford's voice drifted back to them.

Nick sighed and looked at LaCroix. Ford would be all right. Just like a cat, he had landed on his feet -- again.

"He kissed my hand," LaCroix said with distaste.

Nick took his opportunity.

"Well," he smiled, "he could have kissed your -- "

LaCroix's eyes glittered with warning.

It was a long while before Nick stopped laughing . . .

DEAR DIARY

by: *Lorraine Duffield*

APRIL 4

Met a man tonight. I was sitting in a cafe drinking some of the type of coffee that keeps you awake for a week, when a tall, striking man walked in. He ordered an espresso and sat at a corner table, watching the people come and go. He picked up the cup from time to time and apparently sipped at it. But, when I got up to go to the bathroom, and had to pass in front of him, I noticed the cup was completely full. He saw me glance down at his table and gave me what I can only describe as an arch look.

I smiled at him somewhat uncertainly, then disappeared into that bastion of womanhood, the Ladies Room. Inside, there were about a dozen or so women primping; fussing over their hair, applying lipstick, so forth. Isn't it strange how all these really young girls forgo foundation, eye shadow, powder and the other basics of beauty, for just a red lipstick and black mascara? They look positively ghoulish, like creatures of the night, their faces so pale and fish-like. Anyway, I finished what I'd gone in there to do, then found myself in front of the mirror, preening like these other vapid coffee-drinking man-hunters. I snorted, and put my hairbrush away. I was here to drink a cappuccino, eat a biscotti and then go home to lie in bed and stare at the ceiling in an altered state. Exciting? No, but on a dateless Friday night, you take your kicks where you can find them.

When I came out of the restroom there were three women who were draping themselves all over his table, attempting to be casual and alluring. I thought they looked like Cinderella's wicked step sisters trying to vamp the Cinder Girl's Prince C. He, for his part, didn't seem to object all that much. In fact, one woman in particular seemed to catch his fancy. One at a time, the other two women left the table in search of fresh meat. After a few moments, the man and woman got up and left the café.

I sat and breathed wistful, longing sighs, my opportunity having passed before I was able to do anything about it. Soon after, I too left.

On the walk home I was mugged. Well, they tried, I should say. Because, in a flash, before I could scream for help, the man from the café was there. He tossed the muggers aside like he was stoking coal into a furnace. It was that fast, and that effortless.

His date from the café stood at a close distance nearby, a vague expression on her face. I couldn't be certain, but it seemed as if she was completely unaware that anything out of the ordinary had just occurred. She stood, like a mannequin, waiting for him to return to her.

I hovered in the middle of the street, speechless. I couldn't believe what I had just seen.

He walked over to where my purse had been tossed aside, and then brought it over to me. After making sure I was okay, he put his coat around my shoulders and told me to lead him to my apartment. With a gesture, he bade the woman to follow. Him I followed without a second of hesitation, after what he'd just done, why shouldn't I trust him? He entered the apartment behind me, the *date* dogging his foot steps, checked for intruders and then said goodnight.

God! I am so dumb. I didn't even ask his name. It's like my brain was stolen, not my purse. I can only hope he shows up again at the café. I'm definitely going back tomorrow night.

APRIL 5

He came back!

This time he bought me a coffee and sat in a booth with me. He really seemed interested in what I had to say. Normally this would have been so great, but all I could think of were his full lips. I wondered what he would taste like. It has been too long! The last time I had these kind of fantasies was in high school, when I would stare at Mr. Collins, my French teacher. I can still remember his firm thighs and tight butt. He was so cute, and everyone knew he dated his students. I was always too shy to respond to the come ons, that I now know were blatant. I couldn't believe it when I saw him at my ten year reunion -- he'd lost his hair and developed a paunch. Sigh, what a waste.

Tonight the stranger was all eyes for me. It was so flattering, the attention he showered on me and all. It was a shame that police detective came in and broke it all up. The cop hadn't been happy about having to hunt down my new friend. Well excuse me, I wasn't aware this was a militia state. Totally bummed, I watched my chance for a fun Saturday night walk out the door with the Shaggy Haired Detective.

Weekends sure do suck when you're single.

APRIL 12

He came back.

This time I decided to be bold. I bought him the espresso and boxed him in the booth before any of his harem could stake a claim. It was worth it, he was so interesting to talk to, a definite plus in one so attractive. My experience is that gorgeous men most of the time are in a monogamous relationship with themselves. This guy has brains and the soul of a poet. He quoted one line after another of various Shakespearean sonnets and such. His voice is like honey. This is one bee whose stinger I wouldn't mind being stung by. I sat and listened to him, enthralled. Oh, he was feeding me a line, of that I have no doubt. But, I wanted to live dangerously, have one or two late night flings with someone I cared absolutely nothing about.

Everyone else I know has done it. Why should I be the exception my whole life?

I could tell he had that radar which shouts, 'horny female, ripe for the picking.' But I didn't care. His desire for me was in his eyes, I didn't want squander it.

We left our untouched coffees behind and left the cafe. He put a hand at my elbow, and with barely any pressure, he urged me in the direction he wanted to go. We walked for a time, without a word, but it was a comfortable silence. Occasionally, I looked up at him, his face fascinates me.

Oh, I haven't described him! He is tall, well built, but without unattractive bulky muscles. He is the very essence of gentility, with a voice that slides across your ears like a silken caress. He keeps his hair extremely short, but the severity of the cut only serves to underscore his masculinity. His hands are strong and big and I would place myself within them without hesitation or reservation.

He turned to me and asked if I trusted him, I said yes. He then took me into his arms and leapt into the air! I couldn't believe it. There was that coffee establishment directly below us, and surrounding it, other buildings. I gasped aloud in astonishment, at which he turned his head and smiled at me. His smile was so strange, the canines were abnormally large and hung down past his lower lip. Like an idiot I asked if that was the only really large part of him.

He laughed, it was a strange sound. Because with the elongated canines, it came out full and rich and with a certain hissing sound. I reached up a hand and gashed my finger the tip of one of them. It was razor sharp and pierced the flesh, a bead of blood immediately forming on the pad of my finger. His tongue reached out to catch the drop of blood as it fell. Closing his mouth, he savored the taste, and then his eyes changed color to gold.

Oh, I wanted him. I knew what he was and what he could give me, and that only made me want him more. I think he could feel my heartbeat increase, because his face grew tense and preoccupied.

When we set foot on the ground, we were outside my apartment window on the fire escape. The window was open, so we went inside that way. Once in there, I didn't know what I was supposed to do next. I stood, with my hands wrapped around my middle. He came up behind me and touched his lips to the nape of my neck. I shivered, partly in fear, partly in anticipation. When his tongue stroked the skin of my neck, I groaned aloud. He turned me around and covered my lips with his.

I wound my arms around his chest, stroking my hands up and down his back. The muscles there were strong and solid, rippling under my touch. He deepened the kiss and placed his hands under my behind. With a shift, my legs were wrapped around his middle. He was so tall and I am so short, that the part of him I so desperately wanted to feel, was still a good foot below me. Imagining the hard and rigid state he was in put me into a frenzy. My hands were all over him, I wanted so much to be inside of him as an echo of the way I wanted him inside me. Oh, the thought of that made me squirm helplessly against him.

I didn't think of what his arousal was doing to him, other than the physically human obvious. But when he pulled his head back and looked down at me, I saw control on his face evaporate before my very eyes. He snarled and I felt my nipples tighten. The danger was before me and I revelled in it. I might live only seconds longer, and I didn't care as long as he

was mine.

I pulled myself loose and ripped off his shirt. He stood motionless, as I divested him of his clothing, moving only to allow me to take off his shoes, socks, pants and briefs. Kneeling in front of him, I could see that he was all that I had desired or would ever desire. My lips touched him, his body went rigid and his fingers thrust through my hair. My tongue wrapped around him, caressing slowly and then I gave him a little edge of my teeth. He roared and pulled me up to him. He tore my clothing away from my flesh with none of the tenderness I had offered him. I didn't care because now my skin could feel his as he hauled me up against his body and kissed me yet again. I made these desperate mewling noises, wanting him to give me more, faster. He complied with my wish by shoving me up against the wall, parting my legs and burying himself deep within my body. I shuddered in immediate release. There is no other sensation like when a man first takes you.

He moved within me, my inner muscles clinging helplessly to his turgid flesh. He dove in and out, the sensation like electricity stabbing me all throughout. When he began to reach his crest, he lost control and bit me deep in the neck. Wave after wave of orgasm ripped through me, the pleasure so intense I felt I must die. And die I did, the pleasure fading as the darkness claimed me.

I awoke to a hunger I have never felt before. He held me in his arms, still nude, the way I was. His free hand stroked my forehead, an indescribably tender expression on his sensitive features. He welcomed me, his slashed wrist still pressed against my lips. I had awakened to my new life with lightening speed, my desire to be with him surpassing death itself. Despite the hunger cramping my belly, I reached for him again. With a smile he allowed me to love him, with a gentle tenderness this time.

After, we clothed ourselves and he took me for my first hunt. My terrible hunger and thirst slaked, I was overwhelmed with the need to sleep. He took me home with him and I slept the day there. And there I am now, waiting for him to come to me. I can hear him though, on the radio. He is speaking to me alone, and I am listening, like I will always listen, for all time.

He did finally tell me his name. It is LaCroix.

RAGE . . . AND VENGEANCE . . .

by: *Denysé M. Bridger*

Rage.

Not anger . . .

Or annoyance . . .

Plain and simple rage.

It burned through her, fired her veins until she felt her blood would boil and her skin would smoulder. A distant, calm and rational part of her mind insisted she was overreacting -- again. She wasn't in the mood to listen, even to her own good sense. This was becoming the most tiresome and intolerable situation of her life, but it was costing in such vast ways that it couldn't be dismissed, despite her desire to do precisely that. If it hadn't been doing so much genuinely serious damage, it could have been ludicrous.

She fumed in silence as she walked the dark streets of Toronto. Everywhere she looked she spotted some reminder, some small and insignificant symbol of his presence in her world. His presence, and that of the bitch he'd joined forces with in his effort to destroy her life and her reputation.

Hilary Davenport was a highly respected criminologist and teacher. She was also a first class novelist who was enjoying the success of a string of best-selling mystery books. Her temporary residence in Toronto was due to the fact that she was currently lecturing at the city's largest University. That's where she'd first met the woman who'd quickly become the bane of her existence. She had several more weeks to fulfil her contract with the University, and what had begun as a joyous engagement was ending in something dark and insidious. She was getting an '*up-close-and-personal*' look at the workings of a twisted mind. Unfortunately, her understanding of the criminal psychology reminded her all too clearly of the futility of attempting to deal with the couple in a reasonable fashion.

Kenneth and Mirabelle Cartier had been married within a month of Hilary's introducing them. She'd been happy that they'd found each other, and was secretly pleased that she'd helped in some small way to ease two people's loneliness. Then the trouble started. They'd arrived home from their honeymoon, and quietly went to work trying to discredit her. It wasn't overly difficult to spot the motivation, Mirabelle wanted Hilary's position; whether or not she possessed the experience to make herself a viable replacement didn't seem to concern the newlyweds.

Hilary sighed as she stopped at an intersection and waited for the 'walk' light to change. The frosty night air was doing nothing to cool her temper. She seethed all the more as she permitted Kenneth's face to momentarily fill her mind's eye. They'd been friends for how many years? At least a dozen, she calculated. A dozen years, undone in a matter of weeks. Hilary couldn't decide whether it was overactive hormones, a mid-life crisis, or simply a sudden glitch

in Ken's mental systems, but he'd become a stranger to her. A stranger she'd cheerfully throttle, given a chance or an opportunity to do it without getting caught.

As the light changed and she crossed the street, Hilary smiled. Plotting anyone's demise wasn't something she did on a regular basis. She reserved those thoughts for her mystery novels, and the intricacies of the crimes she created, then solved, on paper, for millions of avid readers. She was so engrossed in her dark thoughts, she didn't spot the man who was stepping into the street from a dimly lit building. Hilary walked straight into him, cursed under her breath, then looked up.

"I'm very sorry," she gasped softly, her manners making the social amenity of an apology automatic. When he made no attempt to answer her, she looked closer and her gaze suddenly rivetted to the tall stranger. The cold air seemed balmy when compared to the ice in his unflinching stare, but something about those glittering blue eyes reached inside her and re-ignited the inferno of her rage. Or, was it something else that seared her senses when he slowly smiled down at her?

"I should have been more aware."

She shivered, the response involuntary. It had nothing to do with the night. His voice poured into her like rich Brandy, the stroke of his tone resonant, a caress without touch.

"It's me, really," she stammered, and winced inwardly at the tremor of her voice. It was the cold, she lied to herself. She didn't believe it, but she fervently hoped he did. "I've been walking around in a daze all night. I'm surprised you're the only one I've all but run down." Her smile was self-deprecating, and she took a step back, instinctively placing a small distance between them. His presence was overwhelming, and gave the impression nothing existed outside of his immediate sphere of being.

"You shouldn't be walking alone at night, Miss . . .?"

She relaxed, smiled up into his eyes as one finely arched eyebrow completed his polite enquiry. He was quite striking, she noted absently. Tall, slender, sharp-eyed, and soft-spoken. His mouth looked almost too inviting as his lips curved into a smile that was both mocking and charming, despite the disparity of the two responses.

"Davenporte," she supplied without thought. "Hilary Davenporte." She glanced at the building he'd just left, and her curiosity was piqued. The distinctive logo of CERK Radio was easily spotted, and a furtive look at the watch she wore on her left index finger told her exactly how late it was. She knew who stood before her, his voice should have been unmistakable to her ears. "You're *The Night Crawler*, aren't you?" she grinned. "Your show is considered one of the hottest things around, at least on the University campus."

"Thank you." The two words dripped with pure mocking amusement.

"I am sorry for almost running you down," Hilary repeated a moment later, and began to ease further back from him. "You're right, it's late, and I really should be getting back to my apartment."

"I'll walk with you," he suggested and fell into step beside her before she could protest.

"There's really no need," she objected. A flutter of fear woke inside her, inexplicable and unnervingly intense.

"Would you rather walk alone?" he questioned, his tone deliberately bland.

"I don't even know your name," she whispered, astounded by the stupidity of the remark. As if knowing his name would make a difference if he was some sort of depraved nut. She'd listened to his show numerous times, and this was one personality she simply couldn't begin to dissect. She hadn't decided if he was a total fruitcake, or merely delusional on a grand scale. He talked in riddles, and terrorised with that silken, hypnotic voice of his.

"LaCroix," he informed her with another of those quirky half-smiles. "And, I assure you, Miss Davenport, I am neither a fruitcake, nor delusional." She flushed scarlet, and the rise in body heat accelerated her heartbeat. When his eyes dropped to the inviting pulse at the side of her neck, Hilary had the definite conviction LaCroix heard the erratic pounding inside her chest. She shook off the ridiculous whimsy and tried to pull her thoughts into some kind of order.

"How did you know what I was . . ." Her words trailed into an awkward silence and she tried a second time to compose her shaken nerves before making another attempt. "I'm sorry, again. It's just that you never know what sort of nut is running about." She sighed heavily. "Oh, shit!" she muttered to herself. "I'm not saying anything right tonight."

"Stop trying so hard," LaCroix advised with a low laugh.

They walked in silence for a few minutes.

"Why are you so angry, Hilary?"

"What?" She was startled out of her brooding reverie, and stopped their steps to look up at him.

"Your rage is like a cloud hanging over you," LaCroix observed softly. His eyes raked over her shivering form, unconsciously assessed her strength. She was of average height, the top of her head near his shoulder. She had short, dark hair, and equally dark eyes. She was not beautiful, nor was she plain. Intelligence shone in the inky eyes that spit invisible daggers as she glared up at him. He could feel her enticing heat even with the space that separated them.

"I've got my reasons for being pissed off, Mr. LaCroix," she snarled. "They don't concern you."

"The rage you feel demands vengeance," he said with a casual shrug.

"That sounds like something you'd say to one of your weird callers," she retorted impulsively.

LaCroix smiled again, indifferent to her provocation.

"Why are you afraid to admit you hunger for blood tonight?" he asked when they had resumed their walk.

"I'm a teacher, not a killer," she told him, her tone pointed. "Although, at the moment, it's a fine-line distinction."

"Betrayal is a potent motivator."

"How in hell do you know what I'm thinking?"

"Your mind is clear, concise in thought pattern. You're easily read," LaCroix said, sounding bored with the conversation.

The ripple of fear returned to haunt her, and Hilary had the fleeting impression of countless deaths in this man's history. A stark, horrifying image of him, covered in gore and

smiling, sprang into her mind. She stumbled back as she recognised the distended teeth that dripped crimson blood, and the feral eyes lit by inhuman hunger. She would have fallen, but LaCroix's hand on her arm prevented the fall. She stared up at him, and saw only deep blue eyes and even, very human teeth framed by lips that looked warm and alluring as they curved into an amused smile.

"Who the hell are you?" she murmured, dazed and quivering.

"Your avenging angel," he whispered.

She watched, perversely fascinated, snared like a butterfly pinned to a board, as his sapphire eyes flared and mutated into glowing fire. His smile revealed razor-edged fangs, and a low growl rumbled in his chest when he bent to kiss her throat.

"Jesus! You are nuts!" she shrieked, and pushed him away with a strength born of pure panic.

LaCroix's laughter was dark, and dangerous. He released his hold on her arm, but she remained helplessly trapped by his gaze.

"You want vengeance, I can give you the power to do as you wish, and not suffer the consequences you fear."

"Why?" She fidgeted, and berated herself for being a total moron for buying his line.

"Because I feel like it," he shrugged. "Your honest rage is refreshing, even if your fear is monotonous."

"You're unbelievable," she breathed in wonder. "You are a vampire, aren't you?" She ignored the leap of abject terror that threatened to empty her stomach on the spot.

LaCroix's eyes bored into her until she trembled violently.

"Do you enjoy your life, Hilary?"

"Not much, no," she admitted. "Not enough to want forever."

LaCroix's smile grew softer, sensual. "I could teach you to want eternity, Hilary. Eternity, and a great many other things."

I'll bet you could! she thought with a sudden, unwelcome jolt of awareness. She did not want to want this guy! she told herself repeatedly. She also realised she was lying to herself again.

"How angry are you?"

She considered it honestly. "I've been fighting my life for months, struggling to gain some control of what's happening around me. It's useless. The poison's gone too deep. To be frank with you, I don't see a helluva lot of point to anything anymore."

The silence grew, encompassed them for an infinity of minutes as LaCroix's eyes filled her vision, drew her irresistibly inward. Slowly, she leaned closer to him, sighed as his mouth brushed hers. She tilted her head back, scanned the diamond studded sky above them, and clung to him when the stars exploded into a million pinpoints of glittering brilliance . . .

* * *

"I don't know how I'm going to write this one up, Nick," Natalie's worry was easily read in the tone of her voice.

Knight shuddered when he looked down at the two bodies that occupied the Coroner's lab with them. The dead couple had been identified almost immediately; newlyweds, both employed at Toronto University. One of the University's guest lecturers had been reported missing for several days, as well. Nick felt the knot of dread in his stomach become a roiling well of nausea.

"Are you sure?" he asked with obvious reluctance.

"Can you give me another explanation for total blood loss and those neat little puncture wounds?" she replied sharply.

"No one in the community is this foolish, Natalie," he snapped back, too harshly.

"Maybe there's something going on that you don't know about, Nick!" she fired back, matching his irritation with her own.

He held her angry look for a few tense moments, then turned and strode from the lab.

Natalie sighed heavily and sank into a chair. She hated it when he walked away from her in a mood. She really disliked it when she was the cause of his upset.

* * *

"Why, LaCroix?"

The master vampire smiled and leaned back in his seat. He studied the younger man with interest, felt the waves of anger that emanated from the former knight, and the uncertainty that had driven Nicholas to seek him out again.

"You'll have to be a little more specific, Nicholas," he finally answered, his smile reflecting more amusement when Knight speared him with a look of scowling annoyance.

"You know who's responsible, don't you?"

"It's a personal matter, Nicholas," he said casually. "I suggest you let it be."

"Two people are dead, LaCroix," Nick stated quietly. "It's my job to find out who killed them."

"And what will you do then, Nicholas?" LaCroix wondered. "Will you arrest one of us? That might be a bit tricky, wouldn't you think?"

"Who?"

"I don't think that's any of your business."

"LaCroix!"

LaCroix moved, rose with graceful, eerie swiftness. He stood before Nick, their gazes locked intently.

"Vengeance, dear boy, is between the victim and the fool who believes himself capable of playing God with another's life. That lesson is one none of us forgets."

Nick wanted to deny his master's words, but the truth was something he honoured too deeply. Time hung suspended, and minutes dragged as the intangible challenge filled the small space between them. Eventually, Nick walked away. He stopped at the door of the studio, then spoke without glancing back.

"If this was vengeance, then it ends with these deaths?"

LaCroix hesitated until Knight was forced to look at him again. "Of course, Nicholas,"

he assured softly, a hint of mocking laughter in his tone.

Nick wanted to push him into a promise, but he knew it would never happen. No one pushed LaCroix, and it wouldn't matter anyway, the master vampire was not the one who had killed the couple. He gave LaCroix a curt nod and left the radio station.

* * *

LaCroix settled into his chair and fingered the control panel for a moment before he flicked a switch and leaned toward the microphone. As he spoke, he smiled at the woman who stood with her back to the door, her dark, glowing eyes filled with adoration and anticipation. She'd be an interesting diversion, for awhile.

"Do you feel safe out there, gentle listeners? Are you sure there's no one lurking in the blackness of your conscience, waiting for you? Are your secrets hidden well enough?" he purred seductively. "Be careful out there, boys and girls. The night is unforgiving, a place of cold . . . and darkness . . . filled with rage . . . and vengeance . . ."

HIS ROYAL NASTINESS

by: *Lorraine Duffield*

He gets in a snit,
 most every night.
He fusses and rages,
 I admit, it's quite a sight.
He feels betrayed and rather put out,
 his gift was returned (almost).
He was told to **get out!**
 Now revenge he does plot.
With a full lipped sneer.
 His tactics have changed.
It's really quite clear,
 his goal is the same.
His end is in sight,
 the honey he smears,
Will catch his fly in the night.

GENESIS

by: *Bridger & McClure*

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is a revised version of a story previously published in Spring 1993. It blends the magicks of two popular fandoms, FOREVER KNIGHT and KUNG FU: THE LEGEND CONTINUES.

* * * * *

A tall, pale wraith reached for the phone and dialled a now familiar number. Within seconds, the voice he wanted came across the line. Soft, resonant words were spoken to the detective, a warning given, then the receiver was placed back in the cradle. The ghostly figure then stepped back into the shadows and waited...

* * *

The phone shrilled, and Peter Caine jerked out of his slouch. *Damn.* He'd nearly fallen asleep at the wheel. Too many hours, too late at night. Working the night shift was one thing, but not when he was also working the day shift on the same case.

He shook himself and eased the black Corvette back into its proper lane as he grabbed for the receiver of the persistent phone. At least, at this hour, traffic was light, and he hadn't had an unfortunate meeting with another driver. The captain was notoriously irritable about police detectives falling asleep while driving on city streets.

"Caine," he barked into the receiver, stifling a yawn with considerable effort.

"You want to get to the alley behind Wong's Greengrocer on Magnolia. You want to get there right now," a disembodied voice growled over the static on the line.

The wind had picked up, and intermittent, fat raindrops plunked against the windshield. The cellular phone didn't work worth shit when the weather got bad. Peter had been intending to replace it with a better model, but somehow hadn't gotten around to it with this latest Chinatown case keeping him on the streets night and day.

"Who the hell is this?" he demanded, staring down at the receiver as if it could reveal a face to match the unrecognised voice.

"Doesn't matter. You interested in stopping the vampire killings or not?"

"Yeah, I'm interested."

"Then get to Wong's. Now."

A click signalled the broken connection and Peter slammed the receiver back into the case. "Jesus!" he muttered. This had wild-geese-chase written all over it. Or set up. Or, he reflected with a certain degree of reluctance, it could be a righteous tip, and he could sit here and do nothing about it and blow the whole damn thing.

He hit the brakes and spun the Corvette into a one-eighty turn -- a tiny thrill he had never outgrown -- then headed for Magnolia, opting against using the siren at the same time he decided not to call for back up until he'd had at least a look into the alley. Blaisdell was already making noises about taking him off the case because he was working himself into the ground. All it would take would be for Peter to haul out half the 101 on a prank call, and Paul would have him sitting behind a desk for the next three months. For his own good, of course.

He shuddered at the very thought and took the turn onto Magnolia a hair too fast, cutting the headlights even as he wrestled the car out of a sideways skid. Tires squealed on wet asphalt, and the Corvette nearly slued out of control before he angled it in to the curb at the mouth of the alley.

Peter was out of the car, gun in hand before the vehicle stopped rocking. He caught a glimpse of movement deep in the alley, and he faded into the shadows against the wall of the brownstone.

* * *

The 101 was imposing and impressive, Nick Knight thought as he climbed the stairs that would take him into the old building. He had not been thrilled about having to accept this assignment, but he also knew there was no one more qualified to unearth what was going on. He hated this kind of case; it drew too much attention to things that were best left to television shows, and the over-active imaginations of movie-goers. Vampires. An ancient "myth" used to frighten children and adults alike. Only Nick knew they weren't quite myth, at all.

Knight strode through the winding corridors, then took the stairs that led to the squad room, his instinct guiding him to the place despite having no knowledge of the building's layout. All around him he could feel the collective heartbeats of the many people inhabiting the building; and, he could smell the intoxicating flow of warm blood in untapped veins. His stomach rumbled at the thought, reminding him that he hadn't fed for too many hours.

Ignoring the nagging hunger, Nick reached the squad room and pushed the door open. A glance gave him the location of Paul Blaisdell's office, and he headed in that direction. He was oblivious to the attention his passing provoked and the stares of several female officers on their way out. Nick paused long enough to knock lightly on the door, then entered at the barked, "Come". Blaisdell glanced up from the paperwork littering his desk top, then leaned back to measure his visitor.

"You're Nick Knight," Paul stated, recognising the handsome Toronto officer from the personnel file he'd been faxed earlier in the evening. He was mildly surprised that Knight had chosen to come directly to him; he'd been expecting the detective to meet with Frank, since it was Strenlich, Knight's superior officer was friendly with. "Captain Stonetree speaks very

highly of you, Detective Knight. I'm sorry we have to meet under these circumstances."

Shaking Blaisdell's hand, then dropping into a seat at the off-handed gesture of invitation, Nick asked, "How many killings have there been?"

Blaisdell supplied the information with a heavy sigh. "Six in the past month." He'd seen several of the bodies, himself, and the killer was brutal, leaving very little behind to identify the victims. It had been years since Paul had encountered anything remotely like these bodies, and the tug of memory wasn't welcome. He pushed aside the thought before it could take root. "Peter Caine's in charge of the investigation."

"When can I talk to him?" Nick asked, anxious to get out of the building and onto the streets. If his suspicions proved correct, there'd be a lot more bodies before they apprehended the one(s) responsible. There was the added complication, too, of being unsure exactly whose problem the killer(s) might actually be: vampires, or humans.

"I'll see if he's checked in," Paul replied, easing himself out of his chair as he ran his hand over his hair. "He's been knocking himself out trying to find this guy. I don't know when I've seen him this determined to close a case."

"I can imagine," Nick murmured once the door swung shut on Blaisdell's retreating form. He couldn't repress a shudder as his mind filled with the faces of people screaming in terror of a death they could barely believe, even as it consumed them. How much was imagination, and how much vision, Nick couldn't be sure. The one, irrefutable certainty lay in their eyes, and the unnatural horror that filled their faces. Nick knew it was far from over, the killing spree would continue. Another face, cruel and mocking, drifted behind the dying ones, and Knight deliberately shut out that image.

Blaisdell's return effectively distracted the threat of maddened memories, and Nick brought his attention back to the situation at hand.

* * *

The street light was nearly burned out. Occasionally, it sizzled and flickered, sputtering into near-darkness before finding a weak glow and casting its frail light over the figure standing motionless beneath it.

He was a tall, powerfully built man with blunt cut, nearly platinum hair, and he was dressed in elaborate evening wear, complete with opera length cape. The flamboyance of his attire would have been absurd on a man of lesser presence; on him, it seemed entirely appropriate. While not classically handsome, he was stunningly attractive and thoroughly forbidding. He stood absolutely still within the flickering pool of lamp light until the black sports car stopped across the street and the detective had made his way cautiously into the mouth of the blackened alleyway.

He had been watching the detective for the last two weeks, instinctively knowing where his current investigation would take him, studying his patterns and habits in the hours from dusk to dawn as the cop tried to adjust to the unusual schedule imposed on him by the rash of murders.

Peter Caine was just about perfect.

He was young, physically attractive, even beautiful, and much too idealistic for his own good. Too often, he put the needs of others ahead of his own desires and suffered from a charming naivete that was singularly appealing, though quite impractical. He was also a very good cop.

The street light shimmered off perfect teeth as the cloaked man smiled at that observation. There were many parallels. Peter could conceivably be the companion that the other had not been for many years. In some ways, he was an even better choice. He was younger, would be even more easily manipulated. His belief that the world should be a place of justice and equality would only serve to harden and embitter him when he found it to be a lie ... all a lie.

It was very nearly decided.

* * *

"There's still no word from Peter, and nobody seems to know where he could be."

The police captain spread his hands in an eloquent gesture of half apology, half frustration as he dropped into the chair behind his desk. Nick read both irritation and indulgence in the tone of voice, though, and that faintly surprised him. If it had been Stonetree apologising for the unexplained absence of a detective, there would only have been irritation anywhere to be found in the voice.

"That's okay, Captain," Nick offered quickly. "From what I understand, Detective Caine has been doubling up on his work load because of this case. Maybe he's taking a couple of hours to sleep."

"You don't know Peter," Blaisdell said ruefully.

Nick raised one eyebrow, but the captain didn't explain the reference and Knight sank into the chair across from him.

"Anyway," Nick suggested, "this gives us a little time for you to tell me something about your series of murders. All Captain Stonetree told me was that it was a similar M.O. to some killings we had last year in Toronto, and that you had requested a consultant."

"You got your guy, didn't you?" Blaisdell asked with a lift to his tone that said he hoped the answer was 'no'.

The Canadian detective knew the feeling all too well. No one wanted there to be too many different psychos out there. Better to narrow it down to a few and concentrate on them rather than have them circling the globe in packs. He sighed in barely concealed empathy as he ran a hand through blond hair. "We got him," he said, almost apologetically. "Actually, it was three of them. Some stoned kids who thought they had a cult thing going. You know, blood sacrifices. Real messy."

"That's what ours are," Blaisdell agreed with a weary shrug of his shoulders. "Real messy."

"What's the run down?" Nick had a feeling he didn't want to know, or, worse yet, that he already knew. With a fatalistic acceptance, he waited for the captain to lay out the facts for him.

"They're all in Chinatown," Blaisdell said, settling back into an inert heap in the squeaking chair. "Sex doesn't seem to be a factor. He's -- they -- " he amended with a deferential nod " -- have killed four women and three men so far. The only thing they seem to have in common is age. They're all young, attractive, in their twenties. No common ground as to occupation or social status. Everything from hookers to stock brokers, Asian to Caucasian, one black woman." He sighed again, feeling like he'd run through this litany of facts for years instead of months. "They all have their throats torn out. Literally. The one other common denominator that hasn't been leaked to the press is that there's not enough blood at the scene."

Nick straightened in his chair.

"The M.E. says that there's more blood missing from the bodies than can be accounted for by the wounds, though they're pretty awful in themselves. But the bodies are nearly drained of blood, one and all. Somehow, for some reason, it's been carted away by the murderer, or murderers." He smiled, a grim shift of expression that held no humour. "Thus, our in-house nickname, 'The Vampire Killings'. And, the reason you're on loan to us for this. You, Mr. Knight, are supposed to be the expert."

"Rather dubious distinction, isn't it?" Nick remarked dryly, his thoughts racing once again. "Since Caine isn't around yet, I'd like to make a trip to the morgue and have a look at the bodies."

Blaisdell nodded and rose again, reaching for his jacket as he did, then hauling it on.

"I'll go with you," he said, and followed Nick from the office.

* * *

There were at least three of them. They were stooped over a fourth figure, who was sprawled in the alley, unmoving and silent. Peter melted against the wall of the brownstone and inched his way closer. Now that it was too late, he sincerely regretted not having called for backup. Maybe, against all odds, his mysterious contact would call the station with the same message he'd delivered to Peter. He shrugged off the half-formed hope as ridiculous. Long ago, Peter Caine had stopped believing in good samaritans. Hadn't he? He clutched the Beretta tighter in his left hand, the smooth, cool feel of the pearl butt comforting and familiar to his hand.

He was within twenty feet of them, separated only by darkness, when one man dropped to his knees and bent over the still form stretched between them. With real horror, Peter watched him nuzzle into the figure's neck, and he had an instant's sheer terror as he recalled the condition of the other bodies they had found in the last few weeks. Revulsion overrode caution, and he pushed away from the wall, gun gripped in both hands.

"Freeze! Police!"

He heard the words from his own mouth, saw three pairs of eyes swivel around to seek him out of the darkness, then, without warning, he was slammed face first into the wall. Lights splintered behind his eyes, then fragmented into pain-filled shards of shattered vision. He clutched at the rough wall trying to stay on his feet, his head swimming with pain and his stomach roiling with nausea, the gun dropping from numbed fingers to clatter to the ground.

He felt the trickle of blood dripping into one eye and he tried to turn, to face the attack he knew was inevitable. His knees buckled, and he was only halfway turned when he started to sag to the ground.

Through a blur of darkness and red-washed haze, he saw the fourth man step toward him, then a new figure edged into his dimmed vision. Peter clung to consciousness by force of will as he watched helplessly as the black-cloaked figure reached for his attacker, caught him by the jacket collar and flung him into the opposite wall with the same terrible force that had been used on Peter. The man shrieked a chilling scream that was cut off in mid-squeal when he hit the wall with the gruesome, wet smack of a yielding body against solid brick. He sagged to the ground, leaving behind a smear of gore against the wall.

Through a thickening fog, Peter heard the cloaked man hiss at the other three, then they turned and disappeared into the inky blackness of the closed end of the alley. He had the vague reflection that they couldn't escape that way. The alley ended in a pile of refuse and brick wall. They'd have to come back. He shivered at having to face them again, then the thought slipped away, elusive and untouchable. The rescuer turned to Peter, then, and, suddenly gentle, eased him away from the wall that was his only support. At the movement, Peter's precarious balance vanished in a swirl of vertigo and he fell forward, to be caught and held, then eased gently to the ground.

"It's all right," the stranger said in a deeply resonant voice, the words crooning and comforting as he cradled Peter to his chest, offering both the support and shield of his own body. "There's help on the way. You will be all right, I promise."

With an instinctive sense of trust, Peter relaxed his hold on consciousness and let his mind fade away from the pain, sheltered in the warmth of the stranger's embrace.

* * *

The proposed trip to the morgue never actually occurred. Knight and the police captain had hardly settled into Paul's car when the call came over the radio. Without a word, Blaisdell had swung around and headed for the hospital, leaving Nick to wonder again about the ties between Peter Caine and his commanding officer. Things didn't get a whole more clear for the visiting cop when they were finally granted access to the room where Peter was being treated.

Nick's first thought was that this kid was too young to be in charge of a gruesome series of murders. His second was to wonder if his suspicions about those same murders could somehow be wrong. If what Nick **thought** was happening here in Blaisdell's Chinatown was, in fact, what was occurring, then Peter Caine should not be squaring off against his police captain in a treatment room of the local hospital. He should be lying broken and drained of his blood in a dark alley.

Instead, the detective was fighting desperately to avoid being pulled off the case, and Nick was unobtrusively picking up some insight on the relationship between Caine and Blaisdell.

"Paul, you gotta let me run with this," Peter insisted, brushing impatiently at the neat row of stitches above his right eye, fingers skimming lightly over the dark bruising that had already blackened that side of his face. Miraculously, the deep cut and a bruised shoulder were

the only injuries he had sustained. "We've got an eye witness now. We haven't had **anything** the entire time these killings have been going on, and now we've finally got something. You can't stick me behind a desk. I'll quit first."

"You won't quit and you know it," Blaisdell countered, glaring at the other man from beneath heavy brows. Absently, he pushed the detective back to a seat on the edge of the examining table, trying, as he had been ever since they'd entered the emergency room, to at least keep him off his feet. "So, don't bother trying to run that by me. You damn near got yourself killed tonight, Peter." He held up a hand to cut off the knee-jerk protest. "You didn't call for back up. You went into a situation without any more to go on than an anonymous call. That sounds to me like your judgment is seriously impaired and for your own sake, I'm -- "

"Paul, you can't."

It was a plea, and it stopped Blaisdell in mid-threat as effectively as if it had been shouted at him. Nick watched, fascinated, with the feeling that he was watching father and son rather than cop and superior. The thought didn't have time to solidify before Blaisdell spoke again.

"What did you say about an eye witness?"

Peter's dark eyes brightened at the shift of topic, and he started off the cot again only to be pushed back down. "The guy who saved my ass. He saw the whole thing. He might even be able to identify some of them. What about the guy he killed in the alley? You gotta -- " The spate of words broke off and he glanced from Blaisdell to Nick with only a fraction of a second's question in his eyes when he finally registered that the captain had brought someone in with him, someone who was decidedly **not** his mysterious saviour. "What?" Peter demanded.

Blaisdell shrugged. "Peter, there was no eye witness. And the only person killed was the victim."

"That's crazy. I saw him. He killed one of them." His eyes flicked over to Nick as if seeking agreement or support, then he shook his head. "Who are you?"

With a deep, frustrated sigh, Blaisdell gestured vaguely at the blond detective, and said, "This is Nick Knight. He's the Toronto loaner we requested. You remember. You pulled his file and found the connection to a series of killings they had last year. I was trying to brief him while you were being tossed into brick walls."

The jibe was ignored and Peter stuck out a hand which Nick gripped and shook briefly.

"Thanks for coming," Peter said, then turned back to Blaisdell. "Paul, there was a guy there. He came out of nowhere and he saved my life. He even called it in."

"Dispatch said you called it in yourself, Peter," Blaisdell corrected gently. "You were all alone when -- well, not alone. The victim was there. We don't have an ID yet, but they should get it to us soon."

"But ... but I didn't call anything in." Finally, there was awakening confusion washing through Peter's battered face as he lost his thread of certainty and began to doubt his own memory. "I couldn't. I couldn't even stand up."

"I checked. Dispatch said you identified yourself, gave a location and then passed out. There was no one else there, Peter. You've got a concussion, damn it, there's no way you can be expected to remember exactly what happened. Which is one of the reasons I have to -- "

"What about the contact?" Peter demanded, obviously trying to short circuit the renewed threat of desk duty he saw looming ominously on the horizon. *Or worse yet, sick leave*, he thought, as the word 'concussion' registered in his sluggish mind with a sense of dread. "I remember, he said 'vampire killings'. Nobody outside the 101 knows that's what we're calling it."

"Nobody but the M.E. and the Forensics people and an entire squad of detectives and a town full of beat officers." Blaisdell settled a glare back over Peter. "It's not exactly a State secret, Peter. I wouldn't hang any hopes on that. It could even be a lucky guess." He shook his head and heaved in a breath of air. "C'mon, I'm taking you home with me. You can get some rest, then we'll see if you're up to briefing Nick tomorrow."

Pure panic met that pronouncement. Peter sat up straight on the cot and nearly sputtered in his protest. "I'm fine, Paul. Honest. I can go home myself. It's the middle of the night. You don't want to wake Annie up and get her all upset."

"Yeah, I'll just bet you don't," Blaisdell agreed, "but the doctor said 'concussion' and I'm not letting you out of my sight. And I'm certainly not turning you loose to go out chasing vampires any more tonight." The glower shifted into darker mode. "Besides, I don't trust you."

"I was just doing my job," Peter said with a spread of his hands that spoke of injured innocence. "I didn't do anything you wouldn't have done."

"Well, I'm the one who has to face Annie every time I pick you up at the emergency room. You're off the streets. At least for tonight."

"What if I go to my dad's?"

"You really don't want to come home with me, do you?"

"I just don't want to upset Mom. You don't either, do you?"

"No, but somehow I think we have different motives in this. Okay. Okay, if you go to your father's and stay there until he says you can leave ... "

"I will. I promise."

"I'll get a black-and-white to take you over there. I'd better stay and wait for the M.E.'s report."

"I can take him," Nick volunteered. "It'll give us a chance to talk about the case a little. Give me a head start."

"Great!" Peter agreed too quickly as he slipped off the cot and sidled past Blaisdell before he could be stopped. "I'll check in with you tomorrow, and you'll see. I'm fine."

Nick couldn't resist the thought that he'd just participated in some great escape.

* * *

"Shouldn't you call ahead and warn your father that I'm bringing you home a little the worse for wear?" Nick asked with a sidelong glance at his new, temporary partner.

Peter grinned over at him. "He doesn't have a phone." He shook his head, then grimaced at the lance of pain the movement shot through his head. "My dad's ... a little different."

"I was beginning to think the captain was your father," Nick noted wryly.

"He ... is, sorta." Peter shrugged. "It's a long story. Turn here."

Nick twisted the wheel with one hand and made the indicated turn, wishing he'd been able to bring the Caddy along on this trip. He'd gotten spoiled with the familiar old car, and this rental didn't have the usual 'accommodations' he was accustomed to relying on. "I like long stories," he suggested lightly.

"I mean, it's a really long story," Peter hedged, but with an infectious grin that hinted it was one that might eventually be shared.

Nick didn't push. He was more than a little acquainted with secrets of his own.

"Tell me about this mysterious witness of yours," Knight invited.

"You believe me?"

"Let's say, I'm open minded."

Peter squirmed around in the seat so he could see his companion better. "He was there, Nick. I didn't imagine him or hallucinate him. He was there, and the guy he threw into the wall ... he was dead."

Knight cut a sharp glance over at him, and there was something in his eyes that made Peter hesitate, but he shrugged the reaction off. Maybe he was imagining things. "I know I was kinda foggy," Peter admitted, "but you don't mistake that sound. The way he hit the wall." He shivered at the recollection, the splatting noise still unpleasantly vivid in his memory. "He was dead," he repeated. "And there's something else."

Nick nodded encouragement when Peter faltered.

"They ran down the alley when he took out the first guy. I know that area. There was no way out. They had to come back past us to get away."

* * *

Nick stood in the circle of candle light, feeling the warmth of the gentle glow stealing into his inner being. He always enjoyed the dance of the tiny pieces of fire, one of the few remaining lights he could truly appreciate in any comfort. The studio was literally crowded with candles, all of them flickering their minute points of light out to pierce the shadows draping the room in night. Nick couldn't suppress a shiver of unease at being here, in this room, in the nearby presence of the man who lived here. Kwai Chang Caine had been a surprise, to say the least.

Peter was no preparation for meeting his father. The Oriental cast to the elder Caine's face was repeated only very faintly in his son's features and Nick was not ready to walk into the academy of a Shaolin priest when he helped the increasingly shaky detective inside the candle-lit room. As if he were aware of the events of the night, Caine had been standing in the centre of the ante-way, ready to relieve Nick of his hold on Peter. The detective had wanted to talk, insisting he was fine, running on nervous energy and stubbornness, determined to get as many facts translated to Nick as possible in one sitting. His father had quietly taken it in stride, served him a tea with odd and vaguely exotic aromas wafting from the cup, and then nearly had to carry him upstairs to bed when whatever was in the tea collided with the all-but-ignored

effects of concussion.

Nick had a momentary twinge of nervousness of his own as he actually considered leaving before Caine came back downstairs. The hazel eyes of the priest were piercing orbs of too-keen insight and knowledge. Nick felt exposed and vulnerable, and he was accustomed to neither feeling.

The thought passed as quickly as it had come. He was going to have to work with Peter, at least until this case was solved or shelved. It wouldn't appear too professional to disappear in an act of outright rudeness to the cop's father. Nick was simply going to have to ignore the emotional probes he felt emanating from the priest whenever he was near -- ignore them, and try to neutralize them.

He felt the presence long before he heard any whisper of sound. Only when he turned to see Caine step onto the hard wood floor at the foot of the stairs did he realize that there had been no sound, no noise, at all, to warn of the approach. He filed the observation for future reference.

"How is he?"

"He is sleeping," the priest said in his gently halting cadence of speech. He smiled, a subtle shift of expression that softened the planes of his face. "It is sometimes difficult for Peter to slow down and allow his body to function at its normal speed. Occasionally, he needs a push in that direction."

Nick matched the smile with one of his own. "Yeah, I bet he does."

"I have room if you would like to rest, also."

There was a natural grace to the courtesy that tweaked at Nick's memory, an ancient courtliness that seemed out of place here, even in this unique room.

"Thanks," Nick said with a shake of his head, "but if Peter's okay, I'd like to go back to the station and get some more information. Besides, the police department has provided me an apartment for the duration of the investigation." He shrugged off the excuse. "Back home, I'm on the graveyard shift. Actually, I'd rather work at night and sleep during the day anyway." He shrugged again, suddenly edgy. "Look, I'd better go."

"This case ..." Caine's voice tugged at Nick, keeping him in place despite the lure of an easy escape. "It is very dangerous?"

Nick was held by the layered concern in the voice, the pain lurking in the depths of the hazel eyes that watched him closely, hanging on his answer. "For Peter? Yes, I think so. He's the one on the case. He's an obvious target. At least it was that way in Toronto."

"You were the officer in charge of that case?"

"Yes."

"You were targeted, as was Peter tonight?"

"Yes." Nick considered saying anything else, but logic dictated that if he needed information on his new partner, here was the ideal source. "This case, if it is related to the one in Ontario, is a little more complicated than it seems on the surface," he ventured.

"Yes," Caine said without pretence of ignorance. "Even Peter sees that there is more to this matter than that which can be seen."

"If I'm going to work with Peter, it would help if I knew a little about him," Nick said,

sensing an opening in Caine's interest.

Caine nodded with an odd little tilt of his head, his expression an invitation.

"Like the fact that he seems to have an excess of parents."

The statement was met with a smile, but there was a tinge of sadness that caught Nick off guard.

"I'm sorry," Knight said hastily, "I didn't mean to -- "

"No," Caine interrupted him with a tolerant wave of one hand. "It is a perceptive question. Has Peter not said anything about this to you?"

Nick laughed. "Peter talks a lot, but he doesn't say much."

"One of his most endearing traits," Caine agreed with a wry twist of frustrated affection. "We were ... separated for a long time. Many years. We each thought the other dead." Again, Caine indulged in the expressive shrug. "The Blaisdells took him in as a foster child."

Feeling he was pushing the point, but genuinely curious, Nick asked, "His mother?"

Another wave of sadness crossed the priest's face like a shadowed cloud of pain over the landscape of his features. "She died when he was very young. He never knew her."

"From what I was told, he's a good cop. Dedicated and honest."

"Peter is idealistic. He wishes to save the world, even from itself, if necessary."

"That's a tall order. Most people outgrow it." Nick heard the undercurrent of bitterness in his words, but Caine didn't challenge the tone, nor did he miss the whispered, "I did," that completed the thought.

"I do not foresee Peter 'outgrowing' it," Caine countered.

"The world doesn't tolerate innocence for long, Master Caine." The title came instinctively. "It changes people, not always for the better."

"Yes."

"How long do you think he'll sleep?"

"The remainder of the night and most of the day. He needs the rest."

"Tell him I'll see him at the station tomorrow night, if you would?"

Caine bowed, both an answer to the request and a bid goodbye. Nick found himself answering with a like gesture.

* * *

Paul Blaisdell walked into the squad room at nearly six p.m., rumpled and grouchy. He would never get used to trying to sleep in the daytime, no matter how quiet Annie managed to keep the house. Kelly, even, in a display of consideration, had come in from classes and foregone playing her music so her father could sleep. The effort to maintain silence in a house normally full of sounds and comings and goings merely heightened the unnaturalness of the changed schedule and Paul felt like he had been awake all day only to have to face a night in the same condition. He was already in a bad mood when he caught sight of Peter hunched over his computer terminal, the white bandage at his temple a stark contrast to the dark hair that curled around it.

He hooked a finger toward his office and continued on his unbroken path, knowing Peter

would follow. Sinking into his well-worn chair, he heard the satisfying creak as it accommodated itself to his body, and he waited for his foster son to close the door behind him.

"What are you doing here?"

Peter looked around in mock astonishment. "I thought I worked here."

"Don't get smart with me, kid," Blaisdell retorted. "I can change that, you know."

The defiance died instantly, to be replaced by genuine concern. "What's wrong, Paul? You look rough. You feeling okay?"

Blaisdell sighed. "I'm supposed to ask you that. I'm fine, just can't get used to this sleep all day, work all night routine."

"I know what you mean."

"How's the head?"

"Fine. I slept like a box of rocks. I think my dad drugged me last night."

Paul's blue eyes considered him from beneath expressively arched eyebrows. "Yeah, I've considered doing that myself. Where's your new partner?"

Peter perched one hip on the corner of the captain's desk. "Don't know. Swanson said he was here all night after he left my father's, then he disappeared just before sunrise. Probably went to get some sleep."

"Did you try calling him?"

"Left a message on the answering machine. If I got loaned out to another city, would I get a fancy apartment, a car and an answering machine, too?"

"You'd probably rate a couch in one of the holding cells," Blaisdell growled.

"Very funny. Gotta get back to it." Peter slid off the desk and turned for the door.

"Peter, be careful."

"Always."

"Peter." The word was a sharp wedge of sound.

Peter turned back, one hand on the door knob, the question in his eyes.

"I mean it. Be careful. I don't want to have to pick up your body at the emergency room the next time."

* * *

The phone call from Nick had come around six-thirty, and by that time, Peter had taken all the computer screen time he could stand. He suggested they meet at the Agrippa Club -- anything to get out of the station for a while -- and he figured Nick could find it easily enough from the directions he gave. Stepping down into the smoky room, he made his way across the crowded floor through a chorus of greetings from people he knew both intimately and casually. A quick look at his watch showed him he was almost a half hour early. He barely spared a glance toward the stage where Tyler was trilling her way through a sultry song, but the look no longer earned him a pang of regret. He had finally let it go; there was no way he was going to quit being a cop, and no way she was going to accept his choice. It had hurt, but now there was simply a numbness where there had once been pain. He was halfway through the dance floor when he caught a glimpse of his usual table and the man already seated there.

Peter stopped dead in his tracks.

A couple, swaying in reaction to both the music and their response to each other, jostled him, apologised, and set Peter moving again. The man looked up at his approach, his face smoothed into a tentative smile.

Peter dropped into a chair across from him. "Where did you go? Why? Why did you go?"

"Please, one question at a time, my young friend." The man held up a hand as if it could stem the torrent of words, and surprisingly, Peter fell silent. He waited while the other man tipped his glass of wine to his lips, sipped deeply with obvious appreciation of the blood-red liquid, then nodded toward a second glass. "I took the liberty of ordering a drink," he said. "I hope you like it."

Hesitating only a moment, Peter raised the glass and tasted the wine, never taking his eyes off the stranger. It was strong and bitter, acid on his tongue. For the briefest of moments, Peter could have sworn it left the metallic aftertaste of blood. He dismissed the half-formed observation as absurd before it could take root in his mind. "It's great," he said. "Who are you?"

"Peter, you are so full of questions. Patience is a virtue. Are you not a virtuous man?" The stranger laughed, a light sweep of sound that brushed against Peter's senses like a waft of air.

"I don't understand."

"Drink your wine and I will try to answer your questions."

He nodded again at the glass, a tip of his silver-haired head, a flicker of mesmerising blue eyes, and Peter found himself obeying. He lifted the wine glass and drained it, not even tasting the acrid drink.

"But not here," the stranger added, his eyes on the now-empty glass. "I must not be seen talking to you. There is great danger."

"How did they get past you, and what happened to the man you killed?" Peter demanded, trying to stir himself into some sort of control over the conversation even as he felt it slip out of his grasp. Maybe the concussion was worse than he admitted. His thoughts swam through a muddy fog of confusion, and he knew only that he couldn't let this man get away from him a second time.

"I will answer your questions," the man repeated, patiently, as if he were speaking to an anxious child. "But we must go somewhere safe. There are other lives at stake, and I mustn't risk them. You wouldn't want to jeopardize anyone else, would you?"

"No," Peter murmured, losing the drift of the conversation as the music swept over him, a wash of dizziness and noise that mingled with the presence of the man seated across from him. He didn't object when the stranger rose and took his arm, guiding him from the club, nor did he remember he was supposed to be meeting Nick.

* * *

It was cold out, something that barely registered within Nick's mind. He was equally

immune to the warmth that greeted him in the overcrowded nightclub. Parking had been hard to come by, so he was at least fifteen minutes late by the time he wended his way through the dance floor and headed back to the corner table Peter had set as a meeting place. The table was easy to pick out, isolated with a clear view of the stage and the front entrance. A cop's table, Nick thought with a smile. From this little niche, Peter wouldn't miss a thing. Unfortunately, he was now missing altogether. Tardiness must be one of Peter's faults, he reflected, making his way to the table to wait.

He caught the impression when he was still fifteen feet away.

It hit him with a physical jolt and nearly made him trip over his own feet. He had to take another, careful look to assure himself that there truly was no one sitting at the table, no malevolent force wedged into the corner waiting to ambush him when he came too near. Cautiously, reluctantly, he forced himself to cross the rest of the distance to the table. He stood beside it, letting the after-image of presence pour over him like a tide of sulphurous waste. Whoever had been sitting at this table had to be at least as old as Nick, himself, was, and just as powerful, maybe even stronger.

He sensed LaCroix, but that was absurd. LaCroix was gone, and this time he would not rise again to spread his poison to others. Nick had destroyed him. He staggered against the edge of the table and had to brace his body with one hand on the glassy surface. The tingle of the other's passage raced through his fingers and up his arm, and he jerked his hand back as if he had been burned.

"You looking for Pete?"

It took a moment for Nick to get composed enough to answer. "Yes, I was supposed to meet him here." He turned as he spoke to find a lovely, dark haired woman standing behind him.

"He's gone. Left about twenty minutes ago."

"Did he say -- ?"

"He didn't say anything. He and the other guy -- "

"Other guy? What other guy?"

She backed away a single step, her hand going automatically to her throat to finger the gold necklace there nervously. "You a friend of Pete's?"

Nick caught his unspoken demand as it lurched up in his throat, realising that he'd better at least appear rational or she was going to start screaming. That'd be a big help. "I work with him. I'm a cop."

"Ain't everybody," the girl groused, relaxing instantly. "Pete and some big guy with white hair. They didn't say anything, just left."

"What did the other man look like?"

"Like I said, big, had silver hair cut real spiky. Kinda old for the style, you know? He was at least forty. Real classy dresser, though. Nothing's wrong, is it?"

"No, I'm sure everything's all right," Nick hedged. "They must have forgotten to wait for me."

He started past her, and she added, "Tell Pete that Nicole said to call. I mean, now that he and Tyler aren't a thing anymore, he should get out, you know?"

"Yeah, he should get out, all right," Nick agreed as he pushed past her and headed for the rented car. A couple of calls to the precinct and he could track Peter without raising too much undue attention. After all, Nick was new in town. It wasn't too unreasonable that he'd lose his contact once in a while, and Peter Caine in a black convertible Corvette should be rather high profile.

* * *

The room was elegantly furnished, lavishly expensive, and situated in the best hotel in town. Peter wanted to walk over to the balcony window and look out over the neon panorama in spite of the height involved. He felt he could handle the thirty story view in his present, mellow condition without a twinge of his acrophobia kicking in. The effort to pry his body out of the overstuffed chair was just too much trouble to consider.

The wine had gone straight to his head, and though he tried to concentrate on getting some semblance of answers out of his erstwhile protector, he couldn't quite focus his attention on the questions, even as his conscience demanded that he try.

One question, at least, had to be answered.

"You've got to tell me your name," Peter said, feeling his tongue thick and uncooperative in his mouth.

The other man smiled, a slash of line across his face, and nodded. "My name is LaCroix," he said without hesitation.

"Sounds French."

"It is. It means 'The Cross'. Rather ironic, don't you think?" He chuckled lightly to himself, a surprisingly unpleasant sound, though the irony of the name completely escaped Peter. The blue crystal of LaCroix's eyes hardened, then caught the detective's attention with a force stronger than Peter could resist. "I am trusting you with my name, Peter. There are people here who would do me harm. They would kill me, and those I protect. I am trusting you with my life."

Peter tried to straighten in the chair, attempted to break the hypnotic hold the glassy surface of the eyes had on him. All he achieved was a slight shift of his body. "If you don't tell me who's after you, how can I help you?"

Again, the slash of humourless smile touched the pale face. "It is I who can help you." LaCroix crossed the plush carpeting silently and handed his guest a cut crystal glass full of amber liquid. Peter took the glass at the same time he tried to refuse it.

"I don't think I should -- "

"Peter, you must try this. I have brought this bottle thousands of miles for just such a special guest. Besides, it will ease your headache." LaCroix's hand brushed against the younger man's fingers when he released the glass, the touch sending a shiver the length of Peter's arm. The shiver mutated to a warm glow, almost sensuous in its path through his body, and Peter blinked up at his host, confused, not sure what the intention of the touch was.

"I don't have a headache," he protested, then winced as he realised that he did, indeed, have a roaring headache. Must be some delayed reaction to the injury in the alleyway.

"Drink," LaCroix urged, tipping the glass up with one long, pale finger.

Peter obeyed, feeling trapped by the shifting hues of azure in the older man's eyes, blue that faded to yellow, then darkened to gold-flecked green, eyes that refused to release him. This time the wine was sweet and washed down his throat, cool and soothing. LaCroix raised a hand to Peter's temple, rubbed a lazy circle of pressure there, then let his graceful, pallid fingers trail languidly down the sharp angle of cheekbone, tracing an imaginary line down the jaw, across the throat.

The pale face blurred, and Peter squinted against the haze that obscured his vision. He felt the hand glide down his shoulder and across his chest and he tried to rise out of the chair, uncomfortable with the intimacy of the touch. The hand that held him seemed stronger than it should be and a moment's panic nearly brought him up in spite of the pressure being inexorably exerted against him. The panic faded, then was lost, and he sank back into the cushioned luxury of the chair. He felt the glass tumble from his limp fingers, knew he should prevent the fall, heard the crash of shattering glass as if from a great distance, then sound and sensation faded just out of reach.

LaCroix caught the glass as it began the arc of its fall. In the same motion, he shattered it on the edge of the table beside the chair, the spray of fragments showering over his hand as he released the stem and let it fall to the carpet.

Peter's head had fallen back against the cushioned pillow of the chair as his eyes blinked, then closed, and LaCroix indulged in a moment to study the still, child-like features. He was beautiful, perhaps even more beautiful than the other companion LaCroix had brought across centuries ago, then lost. He wouldn't lose this one, though. He would take his time with Peter, savour the genesis as it occurred and not risk losing him to the vagaries of conscience. As if possessed of a separate will, one hand moved to Peter's throat, and the fingers trailed down the column of neck, the warm pulse of life fluttering just beneath the skin, just out of reach. LaCroix swallowed against his hunger and the need that pulsed through his body, demanding satiation.

Unable to resist the small indiscretion, he leaned forward to nuzzle into Peter's neck, his tongue gliding across the surface of skin in a stroking caress of longing. He absorbed the taste, the essence of his prey, and the sensation stirred the need, waking pangs of craving deep within him. He was so close. The probe of his fangs sinking into the yielding flesh, the wash of first blood over his teeth and tongue ...

With a physical wrench, he jerked away.

Picking up a shard of glass, LaCroix reached for Peter's right hand, lifting and turning it. He lay the jagged edge of crystal against the skin of the inner wrist, then hesitated. Shifting his gaze to the other man's face, he watched the still features, rapt with his own frustrated yearning as he drew the glass fragment cautiously across the wrist. Peter shifted in the chair, wheezing out a tiny noise of protest at the sting that marked the line of the cut as it was etched into the flesh. A shadow of pain momentarily blunted his features. LaCroix didn't move his eyes away from the young face as he raised the arm, scented the fresh, metallic aroma of blood,

felt the stir of hungry lust as his body reacted, and touched the cut to his lips.

Peter jerked his arm at the first, fiery lance of pain as the fangs dipped into the wound, his face contorting with the sensation. Then, even through his unconsciousness, the euphoria gripped him and he sighed as he sank deeper into the chair, his face smoothing out into unlined pleasure.

It took all of LaCroix's control to pull away from the wound. He rocked back onto his heels, kneeling before his victim, angry and frustrated, and it was a long time before he felt in command of his own urges enough to rise and leave the room.

He returned seconds later with bandages and salve, and again went to his knees in front of the chair. By the time Peter responded to his presence, LaCroix was nearly finished bandaging and treating the wound.

"What?" Peter mumbled, half question, half demand.

"You cut yourself when the glass fell," LaCroix explained, finishing his ministrations and inspecting the bandage. "There, I think that will do it. It's a nasty cut, but I don't think it will give you any problems. Do you feel better?"

Confusion blanked Peter's expression, then he tried to sit up, found that whatever had caused the dizziness had passed, and he glanced down at the sticky mess of wine and broken glass on the carpet.

"Oh, damn, I'm sorry," he said hastily, but LaCroix shrugged it off.

"That, my young friend, is why there is maid service in hotels like this. Don't let it worry you. I'm just glad you weren't badly hurt."

Peter glanced at the bandage, felt the sting lingering in the cut and repeated, "I'm sorry. I'm not usually that clumsy." He glanced around at the room, vaguely disoriented, feeling like he had completely forgotten his reason for being here. "Look, I need to get some things done. Will you be okay until I can get back here?"

The feeling of concern tugged at Peter, but he wasn't sure why he was worried. He knew he was grateful to LaCroix; the man had saved Peter's life in the alley. But, there was more to it, and he couldn't quite grasp what it was he wanted from this man. Maybe he should stop by the hospital. He was beginning to think the concussion had been worse than he thought, because his mind sure was somewhere else than where it belonged.

"I will be fine, Peter. Are you sure you should be driving, though? You don't look like you feel very good."

"Driving?" Thoughts were simply too elusive to deal with, and Peter wondered where he was supposed to be driving.

"You said you had to get back to work."

"Oh, yeah." Memory kicked in with a jolt. "I gotta meet my partner. I'm sorry about the glass and the wine. Look, call me if you need **anything**, anything at all. Okay?"

LaCroix's lips curved into a smile, and he offered the detective a nod of acceptance as Peter backed toward the door.

Peter was halfway down the stairs, too nervous and agitated to wait for the elevator, before he realised that he had come here for answers. Answers he hadn't gotten.

* * *

Nick pulled the rental car in to the curb outside the majestic facade of the Sutton Place Hotel. His stomach felt unsettled and nervous, a condition that had grown as he neared the huge building. He couldn't find any logical reason for the reaction, however -- something that added fuel to his already piqued suspicions.

He didn't get out of his car for several minutes, simply stared upward. His eyes scanned row after row of glittering lights, searching for something he couldn't name. A tiny pulse of fear fluttered deep inside him, startling him as he recognised the emotion. How long had it been since Nick had truly feared anything? He didn't bother acknowledging the silent answer that greeted his idle thought.

Pulling himself out of the futile reverie, Nick finally opened the door and got out of his car. He shivered in the stillness of the night, and as before, a reaction just beyond his conscious control made him look upward. Again, the face drifted before his mind's eye, and he shook his head, denying the image as much as the whisper of dread that accompanied it. It couldn't be LaCroix, his mind insisted -- he was gone. Yet ... Everything about this had the feel of LaCroix's madness.

The thought came in spite of Nick's attempts at denial, and he finally took the first step toward the hotel. He reached outward, straining with all his senses to find some trace of the vampire.

His head pinged a stab of pain with each footfall on the stairs, thirty flights of stairs, he reminded himself with an oddly clear piece of memory. So many things were fading in and out of his mind that he couldn't seem to hold onto a single thought. LaCroix. The name slipped into his thoughts, he started to process it through his usual mental file, and it wafted away on some elusive wisp of memory. By the time he reached the lobby of the hotel, he no longer knew why he had come here. Just a vague recollection of LaCroix being a gracious host, not even getting mad when Peter had dumped the glass of wine on his carpet. The guy was genuinely nice in an old-fashioned, courtly manner. Not to mention that he'd saved Peter's life at great risk to his own.

There was some danger to LaCroix. He couldn't remember what, just that it was there, lurking beyond some imagined horizon, and Peter had to stand between that danger and his new friend. Mustn't give away the name. He recalled that much, very clearly. He must protect LaCroix's identity.

Cold night air hit him the instant he stepped onto the street, refreshing him even as it made him shiver into his light jacket. He stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, closed his eyes, and drew in a deep breath of the crisp air, feeling it sink into his lungs and ease the headache that hadn't quite gone away.

Before Nick could do more than brush at the collected consciousness of the people within

the huge building, his attention was captured by the breathless man who was all but stumbling through the gleaming glass entrance. When the younger man stopped abruptly, Nick reached out a hand automatically. He was genuinely surprised when Peter whirled back, fear stark on his features.

"Peter?"

"Jesus! Don't do that!" Startled, irritated at the interruption, he opened his eyes, and it took him a moment to focus on Nick's face. The tall blond cop reached out and touched Peter's arm, turning him so that he could get a better look at his face.

"What's the matter with you?" Nick asked, a touch of demand edging the question.

Peter shrugged off the hand. "Nothing."

"You were supposed to meet me at Agrippa's, Peter. What happened?"

"Nothing," Peter repeated stubbornly, fighting down an unreasonably strong flare of anger at the tone. "I had to check out a lead. You know, police work. You should try it sometime." He started past the other man, jerked to a halt, and glanced back at Nick. "I'm sorry, I don't know why I said that."

Knight ignored the apology. "Who were you with, Peter?"

"I told you. I was checking out a lead. It didn't work out."

"I need to know who you were with, Peter. It's important. It could have a lot to do with the case we're supposed to be working on. Together."

There was just enough censure in the tone to redden Peter's face, and Nick couldn't help notice the violent contrast between the blush and the abnormal paleness of his features. How the hell was he supposed to say *'I think you're hanging out with a vampire, kid, and we really need to discuss it'*? From everything he'd heard about Peter Caine, this irritable, erratic behaviour was decidedly out of character. And, unfortunately, Nick was aware of a few reasons behind such unaccounted for changes in behaviour. None of them were really healthy for Peter.

"I didn't ask you to come here." Peter cut into Nick's thoughts with a snarl that twisted his mouth into a sneer that looked totally out of place on his face.

"As a matter of fact, you did," Nick responded, forcing his voice to remain even.

"Then I've changed my mind."

"So we're stuck with each other until this case is over," Nick told him, using the innocuous observation as a way to take another good look at the other officer.

"Yeah, well, I had something personal to take care of," Peter replied, grasping the vague assertion as it came back to him in slight variation to his previous statement. He could hardly think straight at the moment, and it seemed as if someone else were feeding him his words.

The confusion didn't escape Nick's notice.

"Are you sure you're all right?"

Peter ignored the query and pushed past him, heading for the illegally parked Corvette. Nick caught him by the arm, and Peter spun around, his left hand coming up in a flying wedge that would have destroyed Knight's nose if it had been allowed to land. Nick blocked the blow, nearly missing the connection in his amazement at the suddenness of the unprovoked attack, and Peter dropped his hand, shook his head in confusion, then stepped backward toward the car.

"I'm --- I didn't -- " He shook his head again and turned away. Nick didn't hesitate to

grab him again before he could dart around the front of the ebony car, but this time when Peter turned, his hands were spread in baffled surrender. "I didn't mean it," he said, shaking his head, hazel eyes wide with near panic. "I wouldn't -- "

"It's okay," Nick said quickly. "It's okay, I just want to help. Let me help."

"There's **nothing** wrong! I'm fine!" Peter snapped, anger flaring to life another time despite the concern on Knight's face. He ignored the fact that his outburst was disproportionate to the force of the enquiry. Raising a hand to his forehead, he wiped at the sweat he felt there. It wasn't warm, but he felt like he was burning up.

"How did this happen?" Nick demanded, drawing Peter's over-bright eyes back to his. He grabbed the injured wrist and held it, his look daring Caine to not answer him.

"It's **nothing**," Peter retorted quickly, jerking his hand back as a new wave of annoyance flooded over him. The twinge of pain that the motion caused made him grit his teeth. "And, it sure as hell is none of your business, Knight."

Nick backed off with real effort. He had his suspicions, but he also had an equal number of doubts to counter them. Maybe he was overreacting. It was just ... Nick shivered again, his gaze drifting upward against his will.

"Who did you come here to see?" Knight posed the soft query a second time, capturing Peter's eyes with his own intense look. He read the jolt of panic in the hazel gaze, then it was gone -- shielded in a way that Peter shouldn't have been able to employ.

"I told you it was none of your business," Peter whispered.

The detective's voice was low with a chill that Nick knew, instinctively, was not a natural part of the kid's personality. He also knew he'd only make the distance grow if he continued to pursue his current line of questioning.

Peter ducked his head, choked in a breath of air, and shivered once, a spasm that shook his entire body. When he looked back up at Nick, his face was calmer, his eyes clearer. "We need to check in at the station house," he said, his tone completely even and normal-sounding. "We can drop your car off at your apartment and go in mine if you want."

Nick stared at him, searching his face, finding nothing but the reflection of a perfectly normal question of two cops deciding which form of transportation to use in an on-going investigation. *Okay, he thought, okay, for now, but you're not getting out of my sight for even one minute.* "Let's take my car," he suggested, carefully controlling his own voice. "We can leave yours at the station. I don't think I'd fit in that thing anyway."

Peter grinned, a purely natural expression, the first one Nick had seen tonight that looked like it belonged on his face, and he said, "Okay, but we'll leave it at my place, then we can go see if anything's turned up."

* * *

Peter slid into the rental car and glanced at the roomy interior. "You could set up housekeeping in this boat," he commented lightly.

"Trunk's not big enough," Nick corrected, then glanced at his passenger as he pulled away from the curb. Peter looked better, less pale, less confused. He looked like he should

look, a cop with some colour in his face, a definite light in his dark eyes. If he hadn't known better, Nick would have been reassured. All it took was the memory of the aborted strike Peter had aimed at Knight's face outside the hotel. Peter played life with a very strict set of rules of fairness. That much, Nick had gleaned out of his brief contact with the detective and from observing others interacting with him. Peter Caine did not launch unprovoked attacks on near-strangers.

A taste of acid touched Nick's tongue and he grimaced into the darkness beyond the windshield. This had all the indications of someone prepping Peter, getting ready to 'bring him across'; Nick no longer doubted his perceptions of the mutating personality and behaviour. The recent activity surrounding this area was almost a direct blueprint. As moments of normality intruded on them -- Peter's trying to hold onto his humanity, even though he had no idea whatsoever that he was in danger of losing it -- Nick could have been soothed into a complacency that might spell disaster for the man. It didn't help that, as the influence grew stronger, more out of Peter's control, the detective would fight Nick at every turn.

The first thing Nick could do for the kid was to get him back within the shielding presence of some of those who did care -- like Captain Paul Blaisdell.

"Let's swing by the 101," Nick suggested. "We can see what's been turned in, if there are any changes being reported."

Peter squirmed in the other seat, turning with a jerky twist of his body to look out the passenger side window. "We could just call in," he said with a hasty twitch to his voice, "and see if anything's turned up. We don't have to go there."

Nick spared him a quick glance, seeing the rise of colour in Peter's face, the nervous reaction manifesting itself despite the attempt to keep his voice casual. Not a good sign. It wasn't the squad room Peter wanted to avoid, it was the concern he would find waiting for him behind the closed door of the captain's office, the concern and the close scrutiny. Nick entertained a passing speculation about how much terror he could induce in his partner if he suggested dropping by the kung fu studio for a quick visit with the Shaolin priest. The question became moot when Peter's attention was snagged by something off to the side.

"Pull over," he said with an urgency in his voice that caught Nick's attention. "Here, pull over."

Nick swerved into the curb, and Peter was out of the car before he could ask any questions. Sliding out a second behind him, Nick followed, his hand automatically dipping inside his jacket for a quick, reassuring touch of his hand gun.

The greeting the detective received on the sidewalk didn't seem to be anything that promised danger, however, as he approached a nattily dressed man without any hesitation.

"Donny D," Peter said with a trace of forced friendliness, and he clapped the man on the back.

"Pete, my man," the other returned, doing a quick recon of the detective and the blond man who was instantly at his side. "You got a new partner again? You go through backup like they issued them in disposable units, Pete."

"Yeah, well, this is unit number seventeen." Peter dropped into the role, and that was when Nick realised they'd just connected with one of his street contacts. "Nick, this Donny D,

my man on the street. Donny doesn't miss anything, do you?"

"I am a veritable font of information," the hustler agreed amicably.

Damn, Nick thought, even Peter's snitches genuinely like him.

"I'd love to remain here in this sub-arctic weather, Pete," Donny was continuing, "and discuss the pleasantries of police work, but, as you can see, I am rather resplendent tonight and do have urgent plans, if you get my drift." He spread his hands to indicate that he was, in fact, dressed from toes to top hat in formal, evening wear.

"Yeah, I can see that," Peter said with a lift of one eyebrow, "so where's the party?"

"Hellfyre."

Cobra-quick reflexes had Donny back against the brownstone wall without warning. The informant was pale, his face blanched in utter shock, his fingers clutching Peter's left hand which was fisted into the starched front of his shirt. "That's not polite, Donny," Peter hissed close to the other man's terrified face. "I asked you a question."

"Peter -- "

The detective shrugged Nick's hand off his shoulder. "Stay outta this."

"Pete, I only meant that's where I was going," Donny D whispered, his eyes wide with more amazement than fear now. "I didn't mean to invoke your surely justified wrath."

Nick watched the fury fade from Peter's face, then be replaced by confusion. The cop shook his head once, a silent protest, then he released Donny so quickly that the other man nearly lost his balance. He spread his hands and said, "I -- I'm sorry, I didn't mean ... "

"I understand, Pete, you're having a bad day. Just one of those things. You don't look like you're in the peak of good health, either, which is why you are a bit short tempered, perhaps."

"What the hell is this?" Peter demanded, his voice slipping into anger again. "I'm fine. Why does everybody keep telling me I'm not?"

"Perhaps the bandage makes them assume you are somewhat less than up to par," Donny suggested, trying to lighten the mood. He wriggled his shoulders to realign his dress jacket, brushing absently at the now-wrinkled front of his shirt. "That and the fact that you are a little pallid of complexion at the moment."

"You try kissing a brick wall with your face and see how you feel the next day," Peter shot back.

A nerve twitched in the contact's jaw and he glanced helplessly at Nick. This was not the Detective Caine, Donny D was used to dealing with, that much was obvious. "C'mon, Pete," he said with an ingratiating smile, still seeking to salvage the impromptu meeting, "It isn't the first time you've taken it in the face, is it?" He shrugged when the verbal spar wasn't parried, and reverted to the previous question. "Anyhow, Hellfyre is a new nightclub, not an expletive. It's the latest phenomenon on the south side. The drinks aren't watered down, lots of atmosphere, very spooky." His face altered to a very effective leer. "Lots of leather, trendy hair, people who look like they haven't seen the sun in years. You ought to try it. It would expand your cultural and social horizons."

Donny hesitated, still looking at Peter with a keen sense of wariness. He evidently decided he wanted to part with his information, and Nick found himself watching Peter more

closely than he was observing the hapless informant. There was an edge to the kid's manner that hadn't been there before, something decidedly unnatural for Peter's personality. Before Nick could do more than note the observation, Peter spun away from them without another word and headed for the car.

Knight glanced at Donny, read the genuine confusion, tinged with concern, then he followed the other cop. Donny was still staring after them, his expression unchanged, when Nick drove past him minutes later.

* * *

Hellfyre.

Nick couldn't escape the feeling that the place had been aptly named, if nothing else. As he wended his way through the gloom and smoke, he felt a tingling along the back of his neck. He was being watched. He glanced at Peter and the uneasiness grew when he registered the chill that had come into the detective's eyes -- an expression that was decidedly wrong.

Peter's mood wasn't the only thing that felt wrong. Nick suffered a too familiar ripple of apprehension up the length of his spine. His eyes drifted over the people milling at the bar that ran along one wall of the makeshift club -- it was clear that the place had been in the midst of renovations when someone decided it looked good as it was.

He could feel the presence of his own kind, predators among unwitting prey. He glanced back at Peter, compelled to read the younger man's reactions to the atmosphere and the taint of blood lust that hung in the air. Peter caught the look and couldn't still the shudder of reaction at the contact, nor the anger that quickly followed when he understood that Nick hadn't missed the response.

"Why don't we split up?" Peter suggested, suddenly eager to be away from Knight's scrutiny.

For vastly different reasons than his partner, Nick agreed.

"Start over there." Nick indicated with a vague gesture toward the one area of the room he was certain contained more mortals than vampires. Without waiting for an answer, he turned into the crowd and began a mental search of those surrounding him.

LaCroix.

The name filled Nick's mind, taunting and frightening at the same time. Knight felt the whisper in his senses, the chill of evil that marked LaCroix's presence. That it was impossible no longer offered Nick a refuge of hope -- LaCroix was here. Somehow he was connected to this madness.

* * *

From his hidden vantage point, LaCroix watched the two detectives trace a path through the bustling club. The booming roar of 'music' was muted in this secret room, and he smiled when Peter's eyes turned toward his position. Even with the distance separating them, LaCroix could feel the flutter of fear that quickened Peter's pulse -- and sparked an answering vibration

deep within the vampire. He had been right about Peter Caine. The dark-haired man would, indeed, be a worthy companion. LaCroix would enjoy bringing Peter across, and he would take the time to insure the boy's bond to him was strong enough. Peter would not leave, as Nicholas had -- if he dared to try, LaCroix would destroy him.

Nicholas.

He watched the blond man weave his way through the crowd, felt the searching scope of Knight's thoughts. Nick's presence **had** been a surprise, though nothing in LaCroix's manner would ever have revealed it. The shielding of his own thoughts was natural, but he couldn't suppress entirely the whisper of doubt when Knight's piercing gaze moved in his direction. The other vampire's unexpected appearance could easily interfere with LaCroix's plans.

Which meant Nicholas had to be dealt with, quickly.

Rising, the motion effortless and fluidly graceful, LaCroix vanished in a sweep of dark cape.

* * *

Peter made his way through the crowd, stopping to ask questions as he moved, not remotely surprised when he was all but ignored. He could feel eyes watching him, surveying every tiny motion as he made it, and he shuddered. He glanced toward the rear of the club, drawn to something in the darkness, even as he was repelled by the unknown entity he sensed there. Despite his rising panic, Peter walked toward the darkest part of the place.

He had gone only a few steps when he stopped abruptly, jostling a bizarrely dressed couple who glared at him before they continued their dance, oblivious once again to everything around them. Peter tried to shake off the sudden cold he felt, but it seemed to grow as he unexpectedly met the startled gaze of one of the punks he'd cornered in the alley a few nights earlier -- the one who should have died there. He was about to corner the kid when a hand on his arm made him whirl around.

"I told you not to do that, Knight!"

"What's wrong?" Nick asked, ignoring the outburst.

"The body that disappeared from the alley," Peter replied. "He's here."

"Which one?"

Nick didn't bother questioning the other man's judgment. He was well aware that there were as many vampires in the nightclub as there were humans. Knight suspected that the one Peter was referring to was simply one of his kind -- which went a long way toward explaining why the 'body' had gotten up and fled the scene of the murder.

"The one slipping out the back," Peter told him, pointing out the leather-clad youth and two others who were disappearing through a side exit. "I'll follow them, and you head out the front," he directed. He was gone before Nick could make even token objection to the order.

The exit led directly into a shadowed alley, and Peter shivered when he stepped out of the cloying heat of the nightclub and into the mist-laden evening air. He reached into his jacket

and his fingers closed over the butt of his gun, the solid reassurance alleviating some of the uneasiness plaguing him. Again, he sensed unseen eyes watching him.

"Looks like our cop-friend wants a repeat of the other night."

The voice shot from the darkness like an arrow from a taut bowstring. Peter spun toward it and waited, gun poised and ready. His heart rose into his throat when the shadows began to shift and he realised he was being circled -- he had a fleeting image of vultures descending on hapless prey, then he was forced back into a wall as one of the punks leaped toward him. The response was reflexive, and his finger tightened on the trigger.

"You really shouldn't have done that, cop!" the leader of the trio admonished him with mock regret. He reached down to his fallen friend, and laughed at the gasp of fear Peter couldn't control when the kid he'd just shot rose and glared at him.

LaCroix watched, fully prepared to step in should it prove necessary. He could sense Nicholas close-by, however, and was hesitant to reveal himself too soon. He'd see that this group was properly repaid for their present antics, though. They'd been useful, so far -- a condition that had just altered. They'd been ordered to lure Nicholas into the night, not Peter Caine.

Peter was trapped against the wall now, his gun tossed aside and useless. LaCroix felt his rage blossom, and he stepped forward, only to retreat instantly when he heard a well-known voice snarl in fury.

Nick rounded the corner just as one of the punks was lowering his head to the neck of a barely conscious Peter Caine. Anger rose, and he let it wash over him; canines extended, eyes glowing, he advanced on the startled group. Peter slipped to the ground as the men holding him stumbled back.

Careful to keep his back to Caine, Nick took a position in front of the detective and waited to see if the punks would risk an attack on him. He wasn't surprised when fear rose in their eyes and they backed away. They were newly made vampires, and the presence of one as ancient as Nick scared them -- with good reason.

Another step toward the terrified trio, accompanied by a growling hiss of rage, and Nick was quickly deserted. He bowed his head and forced his mind to clear of the anger. Slowly, he felt his fangs withdraw, and the night swam into focus around him. He turned to help Peter.

LaCroix watched with growing annoyance as Nicholas hauled the detective to his feet and led him from the alley. They were nearing the mouth of the blackened corridor when Nick's head snapped up and he stared back into the darkness. LaCroix's smile was involuntary as he easily deflected the mental probe the other vampire cast in his direction.

When they were gone, he called the others back. He had to move faster now, if he expected to get to Peter and possess him. Nicholas was clearly intent on protecting the boy.

Plus, there was the added enjoyment of perhaps settling the debt between himself and the other vampire. LaCroix would enjoy defeating Nicholas another time. His thoughts ended there as he felt the return of his 'pack'.

"He was not selected as a target, Blade," LaCroix murmured, his smile holding the promise of death as he approached the young man. "I told you which one. You disobeyed me."

"He's a cop, and he spotted us in the alley. He was here with the other cop."

"His partner is much more than a 'cop'," LaCroix purred. "But, even with your limited intelligence you've figured that out."

Blade bristled at the insult but held his tongue. It wouldn't do to get this one mad, he knew only too well.

"Peter Caine is mine," LaCroix informed them, enjoying the fear his words created in each of them. He stepped closer and they tried to back away, terror spreading over their faces.

LaCroix stepped from the shadows a few minutes later, and vanished into the fog-like murkiness that swirled around the black hole that marked the mouth of the alley.

* * *

It had been nearly dawn by the time Peter stumbled up the stairs to his apartment and fell into his bed. He slept like the dead, for many more hours than was customary for him. The shadows of early evening were already stretching darkness across his body when he forced his eyes to open. He blinked several times, then squinted into the gloom of his bedroom. The glowing red numbers on his clock offered tangible proof of just how long he'd been asleep. It was nearing 8:30 p.m.

"Shit!" he mumbled, groaning loudly as he pushed himself into a shaky stand and headed for the shower.

Twenty minutes later, he emerged from his bedroom, shaved, showered, and almost conscious. He'd stopped long enough to haul on clean jeans, then tossed his t-shirt over the back of an armchair as he headed for the kitchen in search of 'breakfast'. His stomach fluttered an objection to the thought of food, but he ignored the twinge. He opened the 'fridge and surveyed the possibilities -- nothing looked appetizing, so he went for his usual stand-by, an omelette.

The meal was hardly down before the nausea started, rising rapidly in his throat until he was running for the bathroom. The retching threatened to tear his stomach apart, and he fell back against the wall, gasping for air that seemed to be evading his desperate need for it. The ringing of the phone finally penetrated the veil of misery that cloaked him, and he staggered back into his bedroom collapsing on the bed as he snatched up the receiver.

"Caine!"

"It's Nick. I'm on my way to the morgue, Peter. Seems three bodies were found in the alley outside the Hellfyre. I'll check it out and meet you at the station in about thirty-minutes."

"I'll meet you at the -- "

"No need," Knight interrupted. "By the time I have a look and get back there, you'll be at your desk, kid. Don't complicate it, Peter."

Before he could raise another protest, Nick broke the connection and Peter was left staring at the dead line. He dropped the receiver back into place and climbed back to his feet. He finished dressing and was on his way down to his car in less than ten minutes.

* * *

"You look worse tonight than you did yesterday," Blaisdell noted, perching on the edge of his foster son's desk. "Why don't you take a night off, Peter." As anticipated, the suggestion earned him a pointed glare.

"I'll take a month off, if you want me to -- once this bastard is in custody." Peter resisted his desire to lean forward, fold his arms, and drop his head. The pounding behind his eyes was like a roaring drill, and staring at the computer screen was making the throb steadily worse.

"You're not the only detective in this precinct, Peter," Paul reminded him, with enough censure that Peter straightened in his chair.

"What's going on, Captain?" he demanded, anger flaring to life as he met Paul's sharp look. "You figure you've got your out of town expert now, so I can be dismissed?"

"Do you have any idea how ridiculous that sounds?" Blaisdell countered softly, amazed at the uncharacteristic resentment.

"Seems to me Knight's arrival has everyone thinkin' he's the only one who can catch this guy."

Blaisdell made an obvious effort to pull back from the growing fury in Peter's stare. He let his gaze absorb the pallor on his son's skin, and the edginess that was fairly sizzling in the air around them. If he didn't know better, he'd think the kid was on something.

"I'm assigning you desk duty tonight," he decided.

"No way -- "

"You stay put," Blaisdell warned, with all the authority of his position and none of the wavering of his parental feelings. "If you leave here without my consent, I'll have you suspended for the duration of this investigation. Am I making myself clear enough, Detective?"

Peter stared at him, his expression a combination of hurt confusion and outright disbelief. As those emotions fell away, a masque of cold indifference fell into place, shaking Blaisdell more than any outburst of anger might have. Peter gave him a curt nod and turned back to the screen in front of him. Paul had the distinct impression he'd just been summarily dismissed.

The phone call came less than five minutes later, and Peter welcomed the chance for escape. With a quick, "I'll be right over", he grabbed his jacket and rose.

"Where the hell do you think you're going?" Paul demanded, framed in his office doorway. He'd been watching his foster son ever since entering the small room, and the call had put an eagerness into the young face that sparked a warning in the police captain.

"It's Knight, he's found a lead," Peter told him. He felt a tiny twinge of guilt as the lie settled between them. "I have to go." When he sensed the opposition about to be voiced, he shrugged and offered Blaisdell a grin. "C'mon, Captain. He's my partner, remember?"

Without another word, Paul watched him go. Dread settled like a solid presence in his stomach, and he slammed the door to his office as he went inside. Blaisdell slumped into his chair with a weary sigh, rubbing at tired eyes. For the first time in many years, Paul felt old.

* * *

Nick arrived at the station a half hour later than he'd told Peter he would be there. He was still mulling over the condition of the bodies when he entered the squad room and looked around, searching automatically for his partner. He was headed toward Frank Strenlich's office when Blaisdell intercepted him.

"Where's Peter?" Paul demanded.

"Shouldn't I be asking you that question?" Nick replied, genuinely confused.

"He got a call. From you," Paul said, his voice dropping with the knowledge that Peter had deliberately lied to him, for the first time. In a relationship that had never known secrets, this sudden lack of trust was a violation of everything that had made their bond such a solid one.

Knight sensed the sadness and the whisper of loss. He remained quiet and waited for the captain to finish his statement.

"He said you had a lead on the killer."

"When did he leave?"

"Half-hour ago," Strenlich informed them as he came to a halt behind Nick. "Whoever called wouldn't give a name, and they weren't on the line long enough for us to trace it."

Blaisdell looked surprised at the information.

"Kid's been actin' a little weirder than usual," Frank offered as explanation. "I figured we might as well know what he's up to."

A shadow of anger crossed the captain's craggy features, and Strenlich added, "I was worried about him, too, Paul."

"Do you have any idea where he could be?" Paul asked, redirecting his attention to Knight.

"No," Nick admitted, "but I have every intention of finding out." He turned to leave, then recalled a detail. "The 'Vette's parked outside."

"Check downstairs, he may have borrowed a vehicle," Frank suggested.

Once Knight had left them, Paul looked at Strenlich, his eyes despairing. "He doesn't want to be found, Frank. Whatever this case is doing to him, it's changing him into someone I don't know."

Frank wished he had something to offer as dispute to that observation, but his own thoughts were of too similar a nature for him to believe he could convince his friend that he was overreacting.

* * *

The trip to Sutton Place took long enough for Peter to grow uneasy about the proposed meeting with LaCroix, though he couldn't begin to pinpoint a reason for his edginess. He pulled the 'borrowed' car in to the curb and hopped out, nervousness giving him even more energy than usual. He almost laughed when he considered the silver BMW he'd 'appropriated' from Impound; this would be the last car anybody who knew him would suspect he'd choose. The fact that he hadn't bothered to get authorisation to use the car would make tracing him even more difficult. He wasn't taking any chances on being discovered, not when LaCroix's life could be at stake if he made an error.

Satisfied that he'd made the right decision, even if it did involve lying to Paul, Peter climbed out of the car and headed for the entrance. He went straight through the lobby, past the desk, and directly into a waiting elevator. The long, thirty floor ride seemed endless.

LaCroix paced the suddenly claustrophobic confines of his spacious suite, his mind racing with the scope of his thoughts. He knew he was rushing his plans for Peter Caine. But, the unexpected appearance of Nicholas at the nightclub had sparked the need for greater urgency. LaCroix had every intention of taking Peter with him when he left this city. He should have anticipated Knight's arrival, he berated himself silently. Who better to investigate the type of crime being committed here than one who had intimate acquaintance with the 'cause of death'.

"Damn you, Nicholas!" he hissed in fury, the soft words barely audible within the silence of the rooms. His head snapped up and a smile passed over his features as he felt the approach of his guest.

LaCroix opened the door just as Peter reached it, and the detective strolled into the suite with a casual air he was far from feeling.

"You're very prompt, Peter," LaCroix noted, his voice even and neutral. He gave the door a push, clicked the lock, and followed Peter deeper into the room.

"You said you were worried," Peter remarked, fidgeting in spite of his efforts to appear calm, brushing his hands against the denim at his thighs. "Does this have anything to do with the danger you told me you were in? If it does, I can probably arrange for police protection, get you somewhere safe where you'll -- "

"Slow down, Peter," the other man said, raising a hand to halt the rush of words. "You must learn to relax."

Peter shrugged, a nervous twitch of one shoulder, his expression sheepish as he realised the extent of his own edginess.

"Would you like a drink?"

The curt shake of Peter's head was an automatic response, a knee-jerk reaction to the offer. "I'm still on duty," he explained, suddenly afraid he was being rude to this man he owed so much. "Besides, I don't want to end up spilling anything. I think between the concussion and the night shift, my brain is shutting down on me."

LaCroix nodded, his face a study in benign sympathy.

Peter tried to repeat his question of moments earlier, but the words seemed to lodge in his throat when LaCroix's pale eyes locked with his. The eerie sensation of drowning in the

grey-blue gaze was overwhelming, but Peter felt compelled to maintain the contact. Instinctively wanting to take a step backward out of the range of that hypnotic vision, he found his body wouldn't obey the command, leaving him staring in mute fascination as LaCroix slowly crossed the space that separated them.

"You're a very special man, aren't you, Peter Caine?"

The words were odd, to say the least, and a tiny flare of alarm worked its way up through Peter's chest. He smiled, the expression shaky and unconvincing, and when LaCroix glanced away, Peter felt as though some intangible, nearly unbearable, pressure on his body had been released with the shift of the gaze. He gasped in a breath of air and sagged into a chair when his legs quivered in a wave of weakness. It took several deep breaths to steady the erratic beat of his heart, and he wondered irrelevantly why he wasn't getting the hell out of the suite -- while he still could. *Such an odd thought*, he reflected vaguely; he genuinely liked LaCroix. Didn't he?

"Why did you call?" Peter forced the words out with what he hoped was a commendable evenness.

"You want to know about 'The Vampire Killings', don't you?" Despite the obvious question in the words, LaCroix managed to make it sound more like statement than an enquiry. Peter straightened in his chair and nodded, clinging to the familiar police instincts that the other man's query sparked to life, trying, with the movement, to nudge out some of the unfamiliar lassitude from his body.

"Are you telling me you know something about this case?"

LaCroix laughed, the sound washing over the detective like a breath of icy wind. Peter couldn't conceal his reactive shiver, and that amused LaCroix. He watched as Peter struggled back to his feet, pushing heavily out of the chair, then he stepped up to the younger man and met his eyes again.

"Dear boy," he murmured, the softness of his breath a caress against Peter's skin. "The things I know would terrify you." There was a deliberate pause, the intensity of LaCroix's gaze once again flaring to hypnotic proportions, then he added with an affectionate smile, "If that were my intention, of course."

Despite the softening of expression that accompanied the unusual words, Peter couldn't escape the feeling that he had just been given a warning, an admonition he would be wise not to disregard. He dredged through his mind for some kind of response, but LaCroix made the effort futile when he took a step closer to Peter. The cloying closeness was beginning to feel smothering.

"Are you afraid of me, Peter?" LaCroix whispered, clearly enjoying his hold on the detective. "Perhaps you should be."

Panic swelled inside Peter and gave him the strength to back away out of LaCroix's paralyzing orbit.

"I really need to get back to work," Peter said, wincing at the rasp in his voice. "If I can do anything to help you, I'll be happy to, otherwise, I have to go."

LaCroix seemed to consider the statement, then once again he closed the distance between them. Predator and prey -- the analogy was automatic, as well as accurate. Peter backed away,

and LaCroix allowed him to trap himself against the solid resistance of the suite wall. He covered the final step between them to stand directly in front of Peter, feeling the young man's uneven breaths whisper across his features. Blue eyes snared hazel again and LaCroix couldn't mistake the leap of fright that put a quiver in the man's mouth and a twitch in his jaw.

Peter's heart was pounding so loudly in his ears that he was sure LaCroix could hear every beat. He tried desperately to turn away from the pale gaze, to make his body obey the need to escape. A flicker of image began to form on the fringes of his inner vision; he recognised his father's gentle smile; then pain exploded in his head. A tiny moan of sound passed his lips as he rejected Caine's image and the protection he had imagined to find there. The pain eased immediately, leaving him more disoriented and confused. He had no time to analyse it; his attention was focused once more on the man in front of him.

LaCroix felt the shifting emotions, the fears rising and ebbing like a tide beyond control. He raised a hand to Peter's chest, relishing the steady throb of life beneath his fingers. Just the tips lingered in the smoothly contoured hollow, and he felt the tingle run up his arm with each pulse of Peter's life. The flow of blood beckoned to LaCroix, inflaming his senses, heightening the desire consuming him.

"Don't ... "

The shaken request put another smile on LaCroix's face; this time the expression was mocking, hued with mild scorn.

"You belong to me, Peter," he informed his captive. "Ask your father." LaCroix laughed bitterly. "Your life is bound with mine -- you owe me your life."

"Is that what this is about?" Peter had to concentrate on shaping the words, but the overwhelming rush of fear offered him unexpected strength. "You want me to ... " The words stopped abruptly, and Peter felt a flood of colour pour over his features. "That's the price you're asking for helping me?"

"You'll give me whatever I ask, won't you, Peter?" LaCroix murmured, his mouth forming the words so close to Peter's face that the man cringed backward in an attempt to avoid even the breath of contact.

"No."

The momentary calm was eerie, and actually managed to put a flicker of surprise in LaCroix's pale eyes. His smile turned icy, and the hand that had been resting in the centre of Peter's chest suddenly moved to encircle his throat. Peter winced when the pressure of LaCroix's grip began to increase.

"You will never say 'No' to me, Peter," he intoned in a low growl of sound. Before the objection in the hazel eyes could find words, LaCroix's hand dropped away and he smiled. "Your mother is blind, isn't she?"

A jolt of terror lanced through Peter at the casual mention of Annie Blaisdell, and he shook his head quickly, panic allowing the gesture to escape the pervading paralysis.

"My mother's dead," he gasped.

LaCroix recognised both the truth and the lie in Peter's statement, and he leaned closer, dismissing the attempted contradiction. "Your father is not. I could destroy him, Peter. You have no idea how easily I could alter his existence."

The choice of words sparked new horror in Peter as some small scope of understanding began to work its way into his brain. LaCroix wasn't talking about killing Caine, he was talking about taking away everything that would mean a true death to the Shaolin priest. At that moment, Peter had no doubts about the stranger's ability to do exactly as he claimed.

Before the detective could find a balance in the sea of terror, LaCroix's mood took him into a new channel of confused responses. The vampire's fingers reached up to trace the smooth, curving contour of Peter's cheek, his touch cool and provocative. The cop's lips clamped together in a twitch of suppressed rejection, and he tried to pull away from the unwelcome caress.

The intensity of LaCroix's eyes grew, until the only thing Peter was consciously aware of was the pale, glowing gaze. He wanted desperately to break away from this man and run, but his limbs refused to cooperate. Peter's entire body felt flooded with some form of tranquilizing drug. The conflict of sensations registered somewhere in his mind, but he was helpless to do anything. His senses were heightened, every tiny sound and touch enhanced beyond reason, while he was unable to move beyond the sensation. LaCroix's smile filled his vision, and fear crested in his throat with a taste of bile at the unmasked lust in the fiery stare.

LaCroix moved closer to the detective, his body touching the full length of the slender form pressed tightly to the wall. The contact was barely perceptible, yet every part of him responded vividly to Peter, the taste of panic even more exciting than his physical presence. LaCroix felt the pressure of his fangs emerging and he fought back the impulse to simply take possession of Peter Caine. It would be so very easy ...

Peter shuddered when LaCroix's hands drifted across his chest, opening his shirt, tracing the shape of his torso through the soft material of his t-shirt, then lingering again over his heart. He forced his hands to move, made them rise despite the agony of objection his effort woke inside his head. He pressed his palms to the other man's chest, intending to push him away. LaCroix caught his wrists in a grip that threatened to break bones. A low groan of pain and frustration escaped Peter when LaCroix slammed his hands into the wall on either side of his shoulders.

"No ... Please ... "

The two words, so softly spoken, were a plea, torn from some part of Peter's soul that the detective couldn't control. LaCroix's eyes measured them, then dismissed the request. The trapped body writhed against the vampire, arousing him further as he ducked his head to allow his lips to explore the slim column of Peter's neck. His tongue played over the pulsing vein, and Peter's gasp of startled pleasure made him smile.

Peter tried to ignore his own response to the unwanted caresses, sickened despite the certainty that he was helpless to stop what was happening. He hated the betrayal of his body, some inner ideal insisting he should be feeling nothing but loathing. But, the stirring euphoria was undeniable; he moved against LaCroix, his body obeying its own need.

LaCroix felt the shifting emotions, heard the silent war inside his victim's head as clearly as if Peter were voicing his confusion. The vampire felt the throb of life and awakening passion against his exploring tongue. He licked the tender skin, then drew away, opening his mouth to reveal gleaming fangs and golden fires burning deep in previously blue eyes. Peter's expression

transformed even as LaCroix had, pure, unadulterated terror lighting the handsome face. He tried to break free of LaCroix's hold. The vampire leaned into his captive, fangs sinking into yielding flesh with a cruel suddenness that made Peter cry out in pain and shock.

Agony seared Peter's throat and he was dimly aware of the rational voice in his mind that assured him he was dreaming all of this. The pain was a lance of fire pouring into his veins, replacing the blood being drawn away. The searing flame receded after a few, eternal seconds, and his body relaxed into the vampire's embrace. His head tilted to one side as ecstasy washed over him, leaving him trembling in LaCroix's arms. He sighed heavily; LaCroix released his hands, and Peter's fingers fisted in the other man's shirt as he now clung to his assailant.

LaCroix felt every tiny shift of emotion, and he drank in the essence of his weakening victim. Peter's blood flowed through him, igniting the hunger more strongly than he had known in many, many years. He wanted to slake his thirst until there was nothing left in Peter's veins, until every drop of the rich, sweet life flowed through him. His own thought stilled the lust, and he forced himself to pull away. He wanted more for this one, needed much more from him. To gain that end, he would have to be patient, and careful.

Peter slumped forward in LaCroix's arms as the vampire released him. Effortlessly, LaCroix lifted him and carried him to the huge bed that dominated the adjoining room of the suite. He placed Peter on the bed, a soft whisper of sound passing between the parted lips when his hand lingered on Peter's forehead. LaCroix knew he should leave while the man slept, but he sat down, instead, on the edge of the bed and watched as the pale face slowly smoothed into exhausted slumber.

The hunger was far from sated, and it took the disciplined will of centuries to resist the temptation to reclaim the kid. The puncture marks on the left side of Peter's neck were an invitation, and LaCroix tore his gaze away from the reminder of how intoxicating the too brief taste of Peter had been.

He smiled as his eyes wandered openly over the slender body, enjoying the well defined curves and contours. There would be a great deal of pleasure to possessing this one, he thought with satisfaction. But, he would do it right this time. He would not lose Peter as he had his other companion. He reached for the belt buckle and gave it a tug, then began to strip the detective.

Peter's clothes were tossed into a chair, the useless gun and holster folded on top of them, and LaCroix's gaze was drawn back to the naked form sprawled on the sheets.

He knew he should leave.

Instead, he settled onto the edge of the mattress, fighting a very real hunger that rumbled, unsatisfied, in his belly. The faint, metallic scent of blood touched teasingly at his senses, and he stroked one finger over the twin punctures at Peter's throat. The vampire felt the faint tremor of reaction that his touch elicited from Peter even through deep unconsciousness.

"You will be everything that Nicholas was meant to be, Peter," he whispered as another ripple of mixed awareness told him his time was limited, and he hadn't yet fed properly.

The reminder of his hunger urged him out of the unaccustomed reverie, and he rose in a graceful flow of easy motion. Concerned now only with satisfying the need of his own body, he tossed the blankets over the sleeping figure. It took only minutes to remove all traces of his

presence from the hotel suite, then he vanished into the night.

Sunrise was only an hour away.

* * *

Despite the lateness of the hour, LaCroix's hunger was consuming his attention with relentless persistence. His brief taste of Peter was like a teasing prelude, and it had awakened a need that had much more complex ties than simple hunger. But, for the moment, that need would have to be the one LaCroix answered. He headed for the park that was nearby, certain there would be people wandering the shadowed paths, even at this hour of the night.

It was appallingly easy, he thought with grim satisfaction. The girl was alone, sitting on a bench, crying over some trivial sorrow that no doubt seemed the end of the world to her. LaCroix approached her silently and sat beside her. He could feel the throb of her heartbeat, wildly erratic from the elevated emotional state she was indulging herself in. The scent of blood inflamed his desire.

She looked over at him and he had the impression of a startled hare. Her eyes widened, then fear replaced the sorrow that had caused her tears. He held out his hand and she tried to resist the lure of his gaze. He smiled, enjoying the futility of her protest. Seconds later, she walked from the park with him, curled into the shelter of his shoulder.

* * *

The headache laced its way through his head on a fiery trail of pain, bringing him closer to waking with each pulse. He floated in the darkness-shrouded dreams one last moment before forcing his eyes to open. The nightmare was still there, and his entire body twitched as he finally escaped it by jolting himself fully awake.

The nightmare didn't fade with the return of consciousness.

Peter jerked upright in the bed, then was dropped back to the sweat-soaked sheets by a lance of pain that darted up his neck and into his eyes. For long, tortured minutes, he doubled over, dragging in painful gasps of air. His mind cleared with agonising slowness, and it finally occurred to him that, if anyone were still in the room, he was an open and inviting target. He forced his eyes open, and recoiled against the sunlight streaming in through the parted drapes. It took an almost superhuman effort to drag his body out of the bed, but rays of light knifing through him compelled him to stumble across the room and yank the curtains shut. The darkness eased some of the pain, and he slumped to the heavy piled carpet, curling into a ball of misery, his arms hugging his knees. He might have dozed off; he wasn't sure. But it seemed like a long time later before he stirred from the position. Again, his first thought was to see if he were still alone. He was. There was no 'feel' of anyone else in the suite -- he had finally remembered where he was, LaCroix's hotel suite -- no sound of movement or sense of threat. Only when his mind had sluggishly sifted through those awarenesses did he realize that he was huddled naked in the corner of the bedroom, trembling with cold and residual, half-remembered terror.

He couldn't think past the sludge in his mind, couldn't sort through the conflicting sensations that memory teased him with, and he gave up the effort. Literally crawling, he inched his way back to the bed and found his clothing folded neatly on the suitcase rack at the foot of the mattress. Even his holster and Beretta were there, piled neatly on top of his jacket. Nausea punctuated each movement as he forced leaden limbs to respond enough to pull on his clothes. He didn't even want to **think** about why he was lying naked in this hotel room, or just how much of the previous night he would ever remember. On cue, fractions of disjointed memory broke in, like snapshots of recollection, flickering through his mind. LaCroix's face, too close, predatory, terrifying, distorted words threatening those he loved. Peter blinked the image away. Against his will, the face returned, looming like a ghost of horror behind his eyes. The man's eyes, grotesquely yellow, glowing with something preternatural, evil ...

He dragged himself onto the bed, half dressed, winded from even that effort. His fingers wouldn't cooperate and the buttons on his shirt eluded them. Flashes of memory kept intruding, stirring up fear and a sense of urgency that was prodding him to get the hell out of the room. The idea of LaCroix returning was enough to panic him, making him even more clumsy and awkward.

Fangs. He could have sworn there had been fangs.

He shook his head. That was ridiculous. He'd been drugged. Or sick. Or maybe he'd finally gone too far over the elusive edge of sanity, spiralling off into some mad dreamscape peopled by monsters and vampires and strangely erotic attacks in elegant hotel suites. He felt, again, the hands wandering over his body, a sensual trail of horrifyingly pleasant sensation, and a shudder rippled up his back as he forced the last of the buttons to close. Heat pulsed through him, followed by a chill that penetrated even through the haze of confusion.

He needed a hospital, though he had no idea what was wrong with him. He needed help, but he was terrified of trusting anyone enough to ask for it. A stray suggestion insinuated itself into the turmoil of his thoughts, to go to the one place he was guaranteed safety -- his father. The idea was met by a flood of nausea, and he mentally recoiled from even the possibility of seeking sanctuary in the kwoon. All he really needed ... wanted ... was to get back to his own apartment, crawl into bed, and ride out whatever the hell was wrong with him.

Through a haze of semi-consciousness, he recorded in a mental file that the suite had been cleared of any sign of occupancy -- *except for the body in the bed*, he thought with a near hysterical twist of macabre humour. He'd figure it all out later. Now, all he wanted was to go home. If he could make it that far ...

* * *

The climb up the stairs to his apartment was infinite, but Peter forced himself to make the journey -- his alternative, passing out in the hallway -- wasn't much of an option. His hand shook as he opened the door and stumbled across the threshold. Inside, the first thing he did was cross the room and pull the curtains. Once the apartment was cloaked in a comfortable haze of shadowy grey, he collapsed on the couch and tried to calm the trembling that had him gasping, in spite of the fact that he'd done nothing strenuous.

His eyes closed and he immediately regretted the lapse as his mind was filled with flashes of the previous night. He shuddered against the recollection of his body squirming in an arousal that made him cringe, even while another, deeper part of him accepted the pleasure he'd felt.

"No!"

The word burst from him like a shout, and he dragged his weary body out of its slouch. Running badly shaking hands through his hair, he headed for the shower.

The water poured over him, soothing aches and relaxing cramped muscles. Peter reached for the soap and began to scrub, his hands rough against his skin as he tried to wash away the sensations he'd allowed LaCroix's touch to incite.

LaCroix. The name evoked a shiver even as warm water glided over him. *Like a lover's caress, Peter.* He jerked back from the voice, only dimly aware that it had come from within his mind. LaCroix had never said those words, but it was undeniably his voice mocking Peter now.

The detective retreated further as another flash of memory tormented him. He could feel LaCroix's hand over his heart, absorbing the steady throb of life as the ice blue eyes held Peter in a limbo of fear and desire. When the face changed, and fangs filled his vision, Peter whimpered and backed into the smooth, solid wall of the shower. He shook his head in mute denial, his arms crossing his chest in a futile rejection. Tears formed and spilled from his eyes as he huddled against the tiled wall.

LaCroix's laughter filled the tiny space, blending with the steady fall of water. As Peter's consciousness started to spin away, it took every ounce of strength he possessed to cut the flow of water and make it to his bed. He fell face down on the spread, wet and gasping, then the darkness claimed him.

* * *

A crimson film lined the interior of the bottle. The level had dropped significantly at odd hours during the day, and now there was less than an inch of blood coagulating in the weighted bottom of the crystal decanter. The ringer on the phone had been turned off, another unusual marker to a day that was fading into a spectacular sunset backdropping the city skyline behind drawn curtains. There was a nearly inaudible click as the answering machine fielded still another call with its pre-recorded message, and the faintest echo of a 'beep' sounding through the dregs of Nick's lingering sleep ...

"Yeah, this is Nick Knight. I'm either asleep or incommunicado. Leave a message at the tone."

Peter never heard the first three rings. The fourth finally intruded on his sleep and one hazel eye opened reluctantly to glare as the metallic click announced the machine kicking in. The tiny red light was already blinking frantically with previously ignored messages. Peter half-heard his own voice start its taped spiel. *"This is Peter. I'm out chasing bad guys. Leave a message or a tip at the tone."* He was nearly asleep again when the beep sounded and Frank

Strenlich's stentorian voice boomed over the tape.

"Peter, get your ass outta that bed, and answer this damned thing. You're not here, you're not at your Dad's, you're not with Annie, you're not in the toy car, so I know your butt's in the sack. Get it the hell -- "

"What?" It was more demand than question, and Peter was surprised by the hoarse croak that passed as his voice.

Startled into momentary silence, Frank stuttered, then demanded, "Are you okay?"

"Of course I'm okay. Why wouldn't I be okay?"

"Never mind. Listen, kid, there's been another one."

"Shit."

"Yeah, that about sums it up. Where's your new partner?"

"He's not my partner."

"Okay, where's Knight? That better? Jeez, your attitude's been gettin' a little rough lately, kid. Lighten up, will you?"

"Sorry." Peter scrubbed at his jaw, felt the trace of stubble there and debated shaving before he headed to the station. A rumble woke in his stomach and he tried to remember his last meal. The thought of food was quickly followed by a rush of bile and a surge of nausea that crested in his throat. He barely managed not to retch right there in the bed. "Look, Chief, I gotta get cleaned up, then I'll be there. I'll get hold of Nick."

"We've been trying to reach both of you all night, Peter. You sure you're okay? That was a hell of a wallop you took the other night. You might want to -- "

"Damn it! I said I was all right."

"Relax, Peter. I just asked."

"Yeah, I'm sorry." It seemed half his conversations started and ended with apologies lately. "You got anything on this latest body?"

"Nothing much. Female, we're guessing about twenty years old. It's as messy as the others, but that's about all I know now. Look, get down here and we'll handle details and see what the forensics people have come up with."

"On my way."

* * *

The rustle of silk marked his return to consciousness as the fourth ring was interrupted by the answering machine. Nick pushed his body into a sitting position, a tiny shiver of pleasant response whispering down his spine as the smooth, cool material of his pajamas caressed his skin. He ran slender fingers through the golden tangle of his hair, and glanced at the machine.

Nick waited until the message light started flashing again before he stumbled out of bed and crossed the room to the phone. He turned up the volume and stabbed at the replay button on his way past it, then let the messages provide background noise while he rummaged in the refrigerator. He was getting low. Bottles clinked together as he pushed them aside and made a mental tally of his stock. He'd have to ...

Peter Caine's voice was the last one on the tape. The kid sounded drunk or semi-

conscious. Not surprising, Nick thought with a sour taste in his mouth. He forced some of the kinks out of his back with a languid, muscle popping stretch of his long body, and picked up the phone. Caine's phone had already been put back on automatic, so all he got was the machine on that end. He left a message that he'd be there in an hour, and headed back to the bathroom.

* * *

It was well after nine o'clock when Nick let himself into Peter's apartment. Repeated calls and pounding on the door hadn't brought the kid out of his stupor, leaving Knight no choice but to break in. He had no doubts about Peter being in the apartment -- what worried Nick was the shape he'd find his partner in.

He wasn't reassured when he entered the bedroom, tripped over Peter's discarded boots, and spotted the figure sprawled on the bed. At some point in the day, Peter had tried to get dressed. He'd managed to get into his jeans, and one arm was clothed by a shirtsleeve -- the rest of the garment was crumpled under Peter's unconscious body. Nick crossed the room and took a seat on the edge of the bed.

In a distant part of his mind, Peter felt the other presence in his bedroom. For a fleeting moment, terror pricked at the back of his mind, and he heard the broken cry that slipped from his lips as he pried his eyes open. Expecting to see LaCroix poised over him, he trembled with relief when Nick's face slowly emerged from the fog of his vision and came into focus.

"What ... ?"

The unspoken question spun away before Peter could define what it was he wanted to know. Knight gave him a nudge and pushed him over onto his back, then waited out the gasps for air that shouldn't have been so difficult for the kid to draw in.

"How long have you been like this, Peter?"

The voice was like a lifeline, and Peter shook his head, partly in answer, partly in an effort to clear the haze that blurred his thoughts.

"Peter?" Nick punctuated the demand with a strong grip on the other man's chin, and he forced the hazel gaze to meet his.

"I think it's just the flu or something," Peter said, swiping uselessly at the hand. Knight refused to be put off.

"Since when does the flu leave marks like this?" Nick snapped, turning Peter's head away to expose the puncture marks on the side of his throat. The wounds were raw and angry looking; Nick knew they'd been made less than twenty-four hours earlier. At the hotel, he realised, the hindsight making a great many of the night's inconsistencies fall into a semblance of logical order.

"Why don't you just get the fuck outta my apartment, Knight!" Peter hissed in fury. This time when he pulled away from the detective, Nick's hand closed like a vise on his arm, and held him pinned to the bed.

"Who did this to you?" Nick asked, deliberately keeping his tone casual and absurdly conversational.

"You're joking."

"I'm quite serious, Peter. You'd make a lousy vampire, kid. Trust me -- I know."

That didn't make a whole lot of sense, Peter thought. Of course, reason wasn't exactly guiding this conversation, anyway. What the hell was going on? His new partner was calmly sitting on his bed discussing an ancient myth like it was the most natural thing in the world.

"I thought I was the one with the concussion." Peter tried to make light of the dread that was settling into his stomach.

Nick wasn't going to be brushed off, however. He watched the emotions chasing across Peter's expressive face, and his heart filled with a sadness he rarely experienced any more. This kid was far too innocent to be used like this. In spite of his attempts to prove he was as tough as the next cop, Peter Caine was much too idealistic and trusting. He didn't have the instinct necessary to survive what he'd become if whoever was preparing him was able to complete bringing him across. Anger rose in Nick, then, reminding him that Peter's lack of trust in him was partly to blame for the man's danger.

Knight reached out and clasped the detective's wrist, his fingers searching for a pulse. It took him a moment to find the tiny throb; it was dangerously slow. Again, Peter tried to snatch his hand back -- and, as before, Nick maintained his hold. He peeled away the bandage that was still wrapped around Peter's wrist. A single glance assured him of another set of punctures, despite the effort to disguise the marks with the gash wound.

"Who did this to you?" Knight repeated, this time locking his gaze with Peter's and reaching for the young man's thoughts.

Peter felt the probe without knowing exactly what it was Nick's compelling eyes were searching for. He broke the hypnotic hold with an almost physically painful effort.

"I'm fine!" he snarled, no longer aware of the alien sound of his voice. "Now, would you mind explaining what the hell you're doing in my apartment, sitting on my bed? You're cute, but trust me, you're not my type!" Almost as a mocking reminder, LaCroix's leering countenance drifted before his eyes. He shuddered when his body recalled the touch of the older man's hands brushing across his chest, and the even more frightening response of his own hips thrusting into LaCroix as he backed Peter into the unyielding resistance of the wall.

Nick saw the reaction before Peter could consciously submerge it. Obviously, there had been something strongly sexual in the encounter with the vampire responsible for Peter's condition. No surprise there. There usually was. Because of the unwanted intimacy of their situation, the younger man was having an extremely difficult time accepting Nick's concern. Knight decided it was time to back off. He rose and headed for the door.

"Get dressed, Peter, your father wants to see you before we head to the station." He didn't give the kid time to object as he walked into the living room to wait.

* * *

The drive to Caine's kung fu academy was made in virtual silence. That fact alone made

Nick edgy; silence was not Peter's style. When Knight pulled up to the curb outside the building, Peter made no effort to get out of the car. He stared at the door, and Nick got the distinct impression the detective was measuring his chances of getting away before Nick could force him inside.

As if sensing the scrutiny, Peter turned a baleful glare on Nick, then wrenched open the car door. He was on the sidewalk only a heartbeat ahead of Nick.

"The idea is to go inside, Peter," Knight admonished softly. "Or, would you prefer I brought your father out to you?" He added the last with a hint of challenge.

Peter's glare settled firmly into place and he stalked toward the door, flinging it open before he stormed into the tranquility of the candlelit kwoon.

"You wanted to see me," he stated harshly without preamble, once his father had set aside his flute and risen from his seat on the floor.

The abruptness, coupled with the edge of steel were a shock to the priest and he glanced back at the man who stood in the shadows at Peter's back. Nick said nothing, yet, but Caine knew he was watching every shift of Peter's presence.

"I was concerned," Caine acquiesced with a slight bow of his head.

"I told you I was fine," Peter snapped. "I've been telling everyone that for days! What the hell is wrong with you, Pop? Is the whole fucking world out to dog my steps because I got tossed into a wall?"

Nick felt the anger rising and ebbing away, leaving only confusion within Peter as he tried to reconcile his feelings with the outburst of misplaced anger. The man's eyes filled with misery when his words settled into the awkward silence, and it was only when Caine reached out to place a hand on his son's arm that Knight realised the latent danger.

"Back off!" Peter hissed, managing to avoid his father's touch as if it were lethal. Some part of his mind insisted that it might be precisely that.

Caine's eyes sought Nick's, and this time there was enough demand in the hazel depths that Knight felt compelled to answer. He stepped forward, his own gaze never leaving Peter.

"Someone is preparing to bring him across, Master Caine. He is becoming a vampire."

"Jesus!" Peter's voice was an angry expulsion of air. He paced the floor, then turned a sneering, contemptuous look to his partner. "You're really losing it, Knight. Have you been going to too many movies, or what?"

"The one responsible for the transformation is old, and very powerful," Nick continued, ignoring Peter's words. "Peter is dying. If we don't stop what's happening, free him from the hold on his mind, he'll become a vampire -- "

"-- a creature of the night. A demon from whatever hell you can create," Peter snarled. "This is a police investigation, not a Bram Stoker novel. You're startin' to believe the name we have for this asshole. Either that, or you're some kind of lunatic who slipped by the psych tests at the Academy."

Caine hesitated, measuring the truth he saw in Knight's eyes against his own beliefs. Another look into Peter's face was all it took to convince him that Nicholas was telling him the truth, no matter how unbelievable it seemed.

Peter saw the acceptance in his father's implacable features and rage rose within him.

When Caine reached out again to touch him, Peter reacted in a purely instinctive move. He caught Caine's extended hand and hurled the startled priest toward the nearest wall.

Impressions became a jumbled blur in the seconds that followed his violence. Peter barely registered the low moan of pain when his father tumbled into a table filled with candles. His own pain seared him as surely as the flickering tapers burned Caine. For one terrible moment, Peter froze in stricken horror, then he turned to flee, unable to face what he'd done to his father.

He actually managed to take a single step before he was flung back by a blow that threatened to break his jaw. Stars burst before his eyes, then winked out one by one as agony smothered him with a cloak of darkness. His father's voice, uncharacteristically loud with a frantic plea, was the last thing Peter was aware of as he sank into the void of nothingness.

Caine turned just in time to see Nick's swing send his son flailing into the opposite wall. His desperate "No!" went unheeded by the detective, and he climbed to a shaky stand. He quelled the immediate urge to retaliate, knowing the other man could not only deflect the attack, but that he'd only struck in defense of Caine, himself. Legs still shaky, Caine staggered to Peter's side, taking a position opposite Nick as the blond man knelt beside the crumpled body.

"What must be done?" Caine asked, reading, correctly, the reflection of his own grief in Knight's eyes.

"There's not a lot of time, Master Caine," Nick eventually answered. "If we had that luxury, I could make it easier on him."

"What must be done?" Caine repeated, the firmness of his tone dissuading the last traces of reluctance in Nick.

"The only way to sever the tie quickly is to cause Peter enough pain that **nothing** can cut through it. He's half turned, and the only thing I can think of that will cause enough agony is holy water." He winced at the consideration, partly for Peter's sake, partly from his own aversion. "It's also the fastest way to know when we've been successful."

"There is no other way?" Caine didn't want it to be a question, but love demanded that he at least ask for an alternative. He couldn't suppress the guilt he felt as he considered accepting Nick's assertions regarding their course of action.

"I don't know," Nick admitted. "I couldn't get him to tell me who did this to him. I don't know how long it's been happening."

Caine nodded and his gaze dropped. He looked into the beloved features, seeing only the beauty and goodness of his child. If he refused to accept Knight's knowledge, he'd lose Peter again. But, the loss would be vastly complicated this time. Death, true death, would not separate them. His weakness would condemn his son to a darkness far greater than death. He looked into Nick's eyes, read a small part of the anguish the other man lived with, and his decision was made.

"I know a place," Caine whispered. "We will be safe -- each of us," he added with a smile. When Nick started to rise, Caine stopped him with a light touch on the detective's arm.

"Thank you."

Nick shook his head, unwilling to accept the priest's gratitude. "We may still destroy him, Master Caine."

Caine nodded, accepting the possibility with his customary fatalism, despite the agony that it created within him.

"Then, he will die my son," Caine whispered, "not a stranger."

"Or, something like me," Nick added, more to himself than to the Shaolin master. He felt only the merest trace of uncertainty when he realised how freely he'd given his secret to the priest, then it vanished into the ironic knowledge that Caine would have known what he was from the moment they'd met. The lack of judgment from the other man was welcome, but it still didn't prepare Nick for Caine's next words.

"He is as you once were, Nicholas," Caine murmured. He looked deeply into the blue eyes and a hint of knowing smile touched his face. "As you remain."

Startled, Nick stared at the other man for several seconds. Caine waited out the silence, then, in the same motion, they rose. Nick gathered Peter into his arms and headed for the door. Caine followed.

* * *

His sleep had been troubled, restless for the first time in many, many years. LaCroix's eyes were brooding as he surveyed the activity within the nightclub, but they saw nothing of the people moving within the crowded room. His finger caressed the rim of his crystal glass, and he tried again to establish some form of link to Peter. He was so close. There should be some whisper of Peter's spirit answering his call. The lack of any touch troubled him.

A few more hours, LaCroix decided. It was possible the boy was still sound asleep, recovering from their encounter of the previous night. If Peter hadn't come to him within a few hours, LaCroix would go and claim his prize. Either way, Peter Caine would be his before dawn. The thought pleased him tremendously, enough that he left his solitude and went down into the club's main room to wait.

* * *

The small chapel was located near the edge of the city, a tiny structure set within a circle of graves. Nick sensed Caine's concern as the priest registered his shiver of apprehension.

"Are you sure this place hasn't been desecrated?" Nick asked, the apparent improbability of something this isolated being left intact forcing the question from him.

"It is very old," Caine assured him. "But, it has not been disturbed in the way you mean."

As it had in the studio, the priest's calm acceptance unnerved Nick, and he found he was staring at Caine in wonder. Not a feeling he was used to experiencing anymore. He felt Peter stirring between them in their mutual support, and he tightened his hold on the detective. Caine nodded at the unspoken decision and they headed through the ancient wrought iron gates that granted entrance with a squeal of protest when Knight pushed them aside.

Peter was waking enough to become aware of his surroundings, and the knowledge that he was being dragged into a church was doing nothing toward keeping him calm. Nick was

fighting his own aversion as well. Only Caine's intractable serenity kept him moving toward the crumbling edifice.

A single push was all it took to open the door leading into the small chapel. A shudder rippled along Nick's spine as his look travelled over the dusty interior. There were no pews, only simple wooden benches. The altar was also made of wood, carved with love by hands long dead. Caine had been right; the tiny place was reasonably intact, and Nick could feel the pull on his senses that assured him no evil had destroyed the spirit of the chapel.

"This way," Caine directed, a nod indicating the front of the church. He pulled an increasingly resistant Peter with him, and the detective had no choice but follow when Knight tightened his hold and propelled him after his father.

Caine released Peter, trusting Nick's strength to keep his son safe and restrained. A search of the area behind the altar offered Caine several moments to compose his own thoughts, and to gather the strength he knew he would need to get through the upcoming ordeal. He had sensed something powerful and ancient when he'd first seen the visiting police officer, but even Caine could not have anticipated this nightmare as the truth of the other's existence. That his son was being drawn into the cycle of hellish darkness sparked a genuine terror within the soul of Kwai Chang Caine. Nothing in his lifetime of experience could prepare him for the devastation of spirit when he considered what his son was about to go through to reclaim his freedom.

Peter was already terrified; Caine felt the escalating fright as his son slowly regained full consciousness.

The items he needed were found in the tiny Sacristy and he carried them back to Nick, his eyes searching Peter's panicked stare, even as he held out his hands to Knight.

"Are you sure you want to do this, Master Caine?" Nick knew he could hardly manage what was necessary on his own, but he wanted to give the priest at least the appearance of an option. He could find someone else who would help, Nick had no doubts in that respect. His fingers bit into the hard muscles of Peter's arms as the kid gave a tentative pull away from him, testing the strength of the grip and the determination of the man holding him.

"There is no other way," Caine replied. "I wish to have my son back. I will not lose him another time."

There was a world of misery in the soft words and admission of a fear Nick understood too well. If death freed Peter's spirit, Caine would find that essence again even if it took a lifetime of searching; the horror LaCroix had introduced to Peter would taint him for an eternity. There would never be peace, only death and bloodshed.

As the vampire's thoughts drifted, Caine's eyes never left the pale features. He felt a lance of pure agony tear through him a moment later, and Nick's golden hair and handsome features were obliterated by a crimson wave. For the first time, Caine saw the haunted past of the vampire, covered in the blood of a thousand deaths, scarlet with the lives he'd taken so carelessly. Whispers of the eternity before Nicholas Knight had sought to reclaim his own humanity. As the surge receded, Caine swayed, and Nick's hand reached out to steady him. Caine accepted the offer with a bow of his head, then placed the tiny vials of holy water on the altar.

"Peter?"

Peter's eyes narrowed, and he glared at his father, hatred colouring his normally gentle features.

"Why can't you just leave me alone, damn it!"

"I can ... not," Caine offered, his heart torn by the alien expression in his son's face, despite his knowledge that this was not truly Peter who stared back at him.

Peter's anger shot out when he felt Nick pressing him down to the floor, and he struggled furiously against the inexorable pressure. Nick's grip slipped away and, for a moment, Peter thought he was free. Caine's hands on his shoulders held him long enough for the other detective to regain his lost balance, then Peter was slammed onto the hardwood floor, and Knight was at his back.

Nick closed his arms around Peter's chest and nodded to Caine. The Shaolin priest hesitated, and Nick's face hardened, his normally gentle expression becoming brittle with anger.

"If you want your son back, priest, you have no other choice!" Nick commanded, deliberately suppressing the twinge of conscience his words woke.

Caine ignored the barb, fully aware that it cost Nick more than it did Caine, himself. He picked up the first vial of blessed water and pried the cap off the container. Nick's fingers bruised the skin of Peter's wrists as he turned the kid's hands over and held them exposed to Caine.

"No!" Peter whispered in a thrill of genuine terror. "Please, Father? No!"

Caine swallowed against the threat of tears and carefully tilted the vial. Peter's scream of agony rose in the night air, echoing within the closed confines of the building. His entire body arched outward, as he strained to free himself from the relentless strength of Knight's embrace. He gasped hoarsely, moaning as the water seared his skin and left it raw and swollen. The faint hiss of sound magnified in the small, closed building, and Caine swayed at the backlash of his son's pain. Nick closed his eyes and held the thrashing man until he collapsed back against Nick's chest, heaving with the effort to draw air into his tortured lungs.

"Father ... "

The single word was a plea for mercy that Caine could not grant. The second drops would hurt more than these had, and it took every ounce of the priest's discipline to maintain his resolve. He reached out and brushed a caress across the feverish forehead of his son.

Peter murmured, an unintelligible whisper of sound, then jerked away from the touch.

Nick brushed a finger over the charred flesh of Peter's wrist, wincing when he saw the worst of the damage centred on the wrist he'd bared earlier that evening. The water coursing over those wounds would have been a blistering agony. Despite the knowledge that it would only help to sever the hold sooner, Nick found he was unable to deliberately inflict a pain of that magnitude again. He decided to spare Peter the anguish of another burn, and he awkwardly tore a strip from his own shirt. He bound the wrist and glanced at Caine. The hazel eyes were eerily calm.

"Give yourself some time to recover, too," Nick suggested. *Then we'll do it again, and again, until we've destroyed ourselves ... or him.*

* * *

The first scream echoed in some deep, hidden recess of his brain, like a twinge of headache that could almost be ignored ... almost.

LaCroix's hand trembled against the wine glass. The dark haired woman with him didn't notice the momentary lapse of control, so quickly was it countered.

"Go," he said, the word breathed out in a gasp of air. The second scream reverberated in his mind, waking twinges of pain deep in his body, the bond still intact, still deeply rooted in his own essence.

"Wait a minute," the brunette protested, the lipstick smudged on her perfect lips the only giveaway to her beyond-tipsy status. She felt her intentions of spending the rest of the night with this affluent looking man slipping just beyond her grasp. Another damn night alone. And she had real plans for this one. He looked like he was worth the extra effort. "I thought we had -- "

"We have nothing," he snapped, with a brusque wave of one hand.

"Damn you," she spat at him. "Who the hell do you think you are? Damn royalty? You can't just sit there and dismiss me, you fuck!"

Amazing, LaCroix thought absently, *how a beautiful woman can turn into a slut just by opening her mouth*. "Go, before I suck the blood out of you, whore," he whispered with a smile that slid easily into a contemptuous sneer.

"Right," she growled, then got to her feet. She spun on one spiked heel, and stalked across the crowded dance floor, never once realising that she had narrowly escaped just exactly that fate.

Watching her vanish into the smoke-laden room, LaCroix twisted the wine glass in one hand, idly watching the swirl of blood-red Chardonnay coat the crystal.

Someone was trying to reclaim Peter.

There were few people who would even know how to try. Fewer people who could succeed. Nicholas was one of those few.

He paused, felt nothing else, then drained the glass. He would have to wait, the first contact hadn't been enough to give him a sense of where to find the detective.

* * *

The night drew on endlessly as they repeated the torture they hoped would eventually free Caine's son. Nick's eyes were dazed, as if the shocks of relentless agony that arced through Peter had translated to a like pain within Knight's soul. Caine did not doubt for an instant that the blond detective was suffering his own form of horror as they tried desperately to save Peter.

Peter stirred from another of the restless fits of unconsciousness that he'd fallen into throughout the night. He twitched in Knight's arms, then tried to struggle into an upright position. As exhaustion had slowly stolen Peter's strength, Nick had been forced to hold him to the wooden floor each time Caine poured the water over his exposed arms. The kid's jacket had been discarded and thrown across the altar after the first shock had taken his awareness from

him.

"No more," Peter begged when he saw the familiar form of his father and the hated vial of clear poison Caine held in shaky hands. Through the blanket of dazed confusion, Peter couldn't recall ever seeing his father's hands shake like they did now.

"I must, my son," Caine murmured, wanting the absolution of seeing some understanding in the hazel eyes. The only emotion he was able to discern was the reawakened terror, and the rage that had accompanied every waking moment Peter had endured since entering the church.

"It should have ended at the Temple," Peter hissed, not sure himself if it were his life, or Caine's, that he'd referred to. If he thought the words would halt his father's actions, he was wrong. Nick's unbreakable fingers turned his arms again, and the sight of the welts burned into his flesh from wrist to elbow infuriated Peter with a rage that was lethal.

"You're trying to kill me." He snarled the words as he kicked out at his father, trying to connect with something more substantial than air. "Is that what you want? To watch me die?"

Caine felt his heart being torn from his chest, and he saw the warning in Nick's blue eyes. Peter was once again attempting to distract his father's intention, using guilt as only a child can against the parents who love them. The deliberate tactic, so uncharacteristic of Peter, strengthened Caine rather than dissuading him. He dropped to his knees and opened another of the vials of water.

"I hate you!" Peter growled, his voice, raw from screaming, barely recognisable to the two men with him.

Caine flinched, and his vision blurred into a watery haze, but he tilted the vial and choked in a sob at the strangled howl of pain torn from Peter. The water, once again, burned into the pale skin, singeing the surface until it bubbled and blistered. Peter's struggle was more intense this time, his long legs thrashing as he snarled in fury and agony. Caine shuddered at the alien sounds coming from his son, the animal madness that possessed him.

Knight had to call up more of his own unnatural strength as the detective in his arms bucked wildly in an effort to escape his grasp. Another keening shriek reverberated in the hollow building when Caine's hand turned a second time and seared the other wrist.

Nick moaned in startled pain when the clear drops spilled from Peter's arm to fall onto the exposed skin of his own arm. Clenching his teeth, he choked back the scream that teased at the back of his throat. He could smell the scent of charred flesh, knew it was his own, and his stomach roiled against the pain as well as the sight of the blackened skin.

"I am sorry," Caine said, appalled by the accident.

Nick shook his head, then forced his teeth to unclench so he could speak.

"It was an accident, Master Caine. Nothing more. And, it will heal quickly." The words had a hoarse, gasped quality to them, and Knight felt a chill pass over him when Peter's laughter burst forth.

* * *

The glass shattered in his hand, blood red drops of wine staining his fingers. Another

silent screech of agony rang in the darkest recesses of his mind.

LaCroix was sweating now, and it had nothing to do with the heaving mass of bodies that surrounded him, unnoticed, in the packed club.

He felt Peter's anguish, knew his exhaustion, knew he was weakening. The bond between them shimmered like a dying light in his mind. The further Knight moved from the sphere of LaCroix's influence, the more powerful his own shielding became.

It was almost ironic.

Peter had been selected as Nicholas' substitute; now it was Nicholas who sought to steal him away.

And he was succeeding. LaCroix could feel it; the boy was being torn from him with Knight's usual, implacable determination, literally ripped free from the only partially completed union. It wasn't enough that Nicholas had severed the bond that united them, now he was claiming his replacement even before LaCroix could fully savour their merging. The remembered feel of the helpless, slender body pressed beneath his own was a torment, an aching void of desire.

Shaking the droplets of wine off his hand, he rose and followed the no longer elusive sense of both Peter and Nick into the waning darkness.

* * *

Nick could feel the approach of dawn, and he shifted uncomfortably, Peter's weight balanced once again in his arms. The dark hair was damp with sweat, and Nick could feel the heat of fever radiating from the young man. Peter's face was turned into Nick's neck, and Knight smiled weakly when he caught a glimpse of Caine's hazel eyes watching them closely. Allowing Nick to restrain Peter had cost the priest dearly, and Knight had no illusions about the trust his acceptance implied. If Caine had thought for an instant that Knight would be a danger to his son, Nick would never have gotten near the man. He certainly wouldn't be holding the kid as he slept.

"You up to another round?" Nick asked, dreading the thought as much as Caine clearly did. But, for Nick, time was becoming a precious commodity.

Caine seemed to comprehend the undercurrent of urgency in the request, and he nodded. Knight saw the tremor ripple through the priest's body as he climbed to his feet. None of the graceful precision he'd grown accustomed to seeing was in evidence as Caine moved now, and for the first time, Knight noticed the depth of pain this ordeal was causing the priest. Caine looked old to Nick, aged literally overnight by his son's agony.

"He will be reclaimed, Master Caine," Nick offered in a voice that was little more than a hoarse whisper of sound. Nick wanted to believe that as much as the kid's father did.

Caine accepted the reassurance in silence, then knelt in front of Peter again. Nick shook the detective awake and, slowly, some of the haze cleared in the hazel eyes, to be replaced by wariness. Peter had given up pleading with them to stop what they were doing to him, and he no longer hurled curses at his father. It was the only positive sign that Caine had seen through the long night. When he hadn't been torturing his son, Caine had been praying for his salvation.

When tears flooded Peter's eyes at the sight of the vial, Caine felt a spark of genuine hope -- the response was the first truly human one he'd seen in hours.

Nick sensed the change, and he, too, risked allowing a surge of relief. When he turned Peter's burned arms up, an unnatural offering, there was only an instinctive twitch of objection. The fear was more than reasonable under the circumstances.

"Father?"

Caine halted at the hoarse whisper and stared into his son's eyes. One hand reached out to touch the tear-dampened cheek and the priest smiled, eyes glistening with unshed tears.

"I'm sorry," Peter told him, only distantly aware of the reason he apologised. His heart told him it was necessary, though, and he obeyed the instinct.

"There is no reason," Caine whispered. He looked away from the unconscious plea in Peter's eyes and he poured the water, bracing himself for the reactive scream.

The holy water ran freely over the skin, and Peter sagged back into Knight's embrace. All he felt was the coolness of the water, and he shivered as the liquid soothed the heat of his skin.

"It's over," Nick told them. "Whatever Gods you pray to have decided to answer this time, Caine." Urgency goaded him on, giving him the respite of enjoying his own relief. "He's still vulnerable. We have to get him someplace safe, before whoever did this to him sabotages his freedom."

Within the circle of his embrace, Nick felt the sobs begin, the only release Peter's weakened body could allow him. Tears streamed down the pale cheeks and Knight very gently released Peter into his father's arms.

"The sun will rise very soon," Caine noted, his relief tainted by concern for the other detective.

"We still have to get him -- " Nick's words halted abruptly, and fear rocked through him. He whirled, facing the door, and the shadow hovering there. Countless emotions raced through him as he was finally faced with the reality of LaCroix's presence. After the initial shock passed, he found he was still able to move.

LaCroix stood just outside the door, his eyes raking over Nick as the blond vampire stood, rallied his scattered senses, and stepped in front of the two mortals. *So, Knight will be Peter's champion in this battle.* He should have known before now; he should have been certain from the moment he'd spotted them together. Yet, there had been that fragile thread of hope remaining, the almost whimsical wish that Nick would not force LaCroix to destroy him. The delicate strand snapped with a quivering sigh, and the space that separated the two vampires became an impassable chasm.

With a smile that promised it was far from over, LaCroix bowed to Nick, then turned away in a swirl of cape and shadows.

Nick felt the malevolence of the unspoken threat, heard LaCroix's unspoken warning -- promise. He dismissed it as he turned to face Caine. There were more immediate things to be taken care of before the sun drove him to his own sleep.

"He'll be safe here," Nick suggested when he saw Caine was preparing to leave.

"He will also be safe at my studio."

"Not as -- "

Caine stopped the flow of words with a shake of his head.

"I am a priest, Nicholas. The studio is a place of worship, as well as a place of study. He will have the same spiritual protection that this chapel offers."

Nick was far from convinced, but he didn't have time to argue. Sunrise was less than an hour away.

"I have to go," he said, apology in the words. "I'll have time to leave you at the academy." Even as he made the assertion he wondered if he truly did have the time to spare. He'd make the time, and it would be enough, he decided. He leaned forward and helped Caine raise a weaving Peter to a trembling stand.

Caine nodded his understanding, and they headed for the door.

* * *

The trip back to the academy was made quickly and quietly. Nick's mind was filled with endless questions about the ghost from his past. He'd known all along, though, hadn't he? Some inner instinct had whispered LaCroix's name from the start. And Nick had chosen to ignore the warning. Something he should have learned years earlier not to do.

The dark reverie was interrupted by their arrival at Caine's studio. Knight cut the ignition and got out of the car. He reached back to take Peter from Caine's supporting embrace, easily lifting the detective and carrying him inside as Caine led the way. He continued to follow the Shaolin priest up to the second level apartment that served as Caine's home.

"I can make him comfortable, Master Caine," Nick began, his tone one of near reluctance. When Caine's shrewd eyes met his, he completed the statement. "I can also insure he remains safely asleep until this is over."

Caine measured the words and the implications of the things he knew Nick wasn't voicing. "You intend to face him alone."

"I intend to put an end to the killing and the threat to your son," Nick corrected, though it was a fine line distinction, at best.

"I will be waiting for you tonight," Caine decided.

"Wait a minute," Nick began, only to be interrupted by the priest.

"You have given me back my son, Nicholas. I will not allow you to pay for that gift with your own life."

"Aren't we overlooking something?" Knight remarked dryly. "My life was over centuries ago. Peter needs you here. If LaCroix tries to get to him, he'll be safe with your presence. A priest is a powerful enemy against our kind."

"The Ancient is a priest also."

"You have no idea of what danger there is in confronting this one, Master Caine."

For several seconds, Caine remained silent, then he looked down at Peter's face, seeing the peace of exhausted sleep. He didn't glance back up at Knight when he spoke again.

"You said you could help him."

Nick knew the conversation had just been closed by the priest, and he bristled in

annoyance. The kid definitely got his stubborn streak from his father.

"Yes, I can." Conscious of the lack of time, Nick knelt beside the cot. He sifted through his memory, concentrated on a technique he hadn't employed in almost a hundred years. A hint of memory teased at his mind; the American Civil War raging around him, men dying despite his desperate attempts to save them, and the flow of too much blood. LaCroix had been there then, too.

He shook off the memory and touched Peter's face, waiting for the fluttering lids to open and allow the hazel eyes to focus on him. He smiled, the expression one of warm reassurance. Then he bent closer, his eyes compelling and hypnotic. His voice dropped to a soothing, luring low purr of sound, and he spoke.

"Peter, can you hear me? You do not feel the pain. You do not feel the pain." He saw the hint of response in the drowsy eyes, and he nodded as his thumb continued its soft stroking against Peter's temple. "You will sleep now ... for days. You will rest and you will feel nothing." A barely perceptible nod met the words, and Nick smiled once more before he closed the now-vacant dark eyes with exquisite gentleness.

"I have to go," he said, renewed urgency making him conscious of the agitation in his voice.

Caine bowed his head. "Until tonight," he said softly.

Nick didn't bother trying to fight the priest; he had a feeling Caine would find him if he didn't come back at sunset. He nodded, making no effort to masque his displeasure, then he slipped from the kwoon.

The first glowing rays of morning sunshine were reaching across the landscape when Knight slid into his bed with a weary sigh.

* * *

Caine looked around in veiled suspicion as he and Nick made their way to the rear of the silent club. Hellfyre was closed to the general public tonight, but Caine and Nick had been granted entrance as soon as the detective's car had pulled up outside the place. The watchful eyes of the assembled 'guests' was unnerving. At the rear table, hidden in partial shadow, LaCroix watched their approach.

One of the more foolhardy young vampires made a step toward Caine, only to be driven back by the savage hiss of fury that came without warning from Nick. Caine looked mildly surprised at the reaction, then turned his attention to the man now in front of them. LaCroix's steady stare was cold, tinged with faint contempt. It was difficult to know if the emotion was directed at them, or at the ineffectual boy who had tried to block their approach. The priest felt a shudder of cold dread when he met the unfathomable blue eyes and the death that resided in their depths.

"I've been expecting you, Nicholas," LaCroix murmured, offering them seats at the table.

"Call off your pets," Nick directed. "Before I decide to reward them for the rash of killings they've indulged in recently."

"Reward them in any fashion you wish, Nicholas," LaCroix offered with a laugh. He turned speculative eyes toward Caine, and abruptly changed the subject. "I hadn't anticipated the presence of a priest."

"This is Peter Caine's father," Nick told him, certain that the information was unnecessary, but falling into the polite game anyway.

The mention of Peter sparked a flicker of reaction on the austere features, and Nick sensed the familiar tingle of warning along his spine. LaCroix's anger was dangerous; it always had been, and his icy stare was a silent admonishment to Nick to tread carefully.

"I hadn't expected to find you here, Nicholas," he said quietly, all but ignoring Caine's silent presence. The priest had no effect at all on LaCroix's composure, not as he did on the others scattered about the club.

Nick didn't bother asking the question that observation demanded; there would be plenty of time for answers after he'd settled the current problem of Peter's safety. Wondering about LaCroix's return had chased Nick into his sleep, and despite the twenty-four hours that had passed since he'd come face to face with the other vampire, Nick still found himself mentally denying the possibility of his mentor's existence.

"Peter Caine is not -- "

"I'm not a fool, Nicholas," LaCroix interrupted sharply. "Don't presume to treat me like one!" Again, there was the glitter of warning in LaCroix's ice blue eyes. The expression changed in a flow of transforming features, and LaCroix's smile was even more frightening than his reproaches. "Where is Peter, Nicholas?"

Knight didn't miss the threat contained in the words, and he placed a steadying hand on Caine's arm as he felt the priest tense.

"Out of your reach, LaCroix," he answered quietly. "As I intend for him to stay."

"You know better than to fight me, Nicholas. You always lose."

Nick countered. "Not always."

"Nicholas." LaCroix's tone became chiding. "I am here. What more proof do you need?"

"Stay away from Peter Caine."

LaCroix's eyes grew thoughtful, and his smile became genuine. He leaned forward and touched Nick's hair in a barely perceptible caress. "I will do as you ask, Nicholas. But, you know my price."

The statement hardly came as a surprise to Nick; if anything, he'd have been shocked to not be met with this bargain. Caine's movement drew his attention from LaCroix and he turned to see the priest's eyes dark with anger that seemed totally out of place in his serene features.

"You cannot do this, Nicholas," Caine said softly. "You have fought too long to be free of this man."

Nick let bitterness taint his answering smile. "You said it yourself, Master Caine. Peter's your son, and he'd never survive this version of 'life'." When it looked like the other man would object further, Knight shook his head. "I have a thousand years to undue this decision. Nothing's going to change for me, not in Peter's lifetime. I want him to have that

life; he's fought for the things he cherishes, too. He deserves the time to enjoy them. Time to find his father's love and spirit, again. Your life, and his, are little more than a heartbeat's space of time to me. I have eternity, Caine." He realised as he spoke that he was telling LaCroix he had no intention of holding up his end of their agreement -- not long term, at any rate. But, he also knew the years he was willing to sacrifice would be considered enough time to make him change his mind -- LaCroix's arrogance would allow him nothing less than to believe he could sway Nick's decision toward meeting his desires.

"This mortal child means too much to you, Nicholas," LaCroix interjected, his tone teasing, mildly contemptuous of the weakness he perceived the attachment to be.

"You should be grateful that he does," Nick pointed out with a smile. "Otherwise we wouldn't be having this discussion, LaCroix."

The other vampire nodded, the only concession he allowed as he awaited Caine's reaction.

Caine felt the chill working through his body as he watched the pain in Knight's eyes reach darker depths. The blond was once more contemplating the loss of everything he sought to regain. Caine knew there was no way to argue, not if he expected to keep his son safe from LaCroix's evil. The understanding did nothing to make the choice an easier one to accept. He rose slowly, and Nick did the same, standing before the Shaolin priest with a smile that was genuinely warm.

"I thank you again for the life of my son," Caine whispered. Then he bowed low before Nick. When he straightened, he touched a gentle hand to the blond's cheek. "You have no need to search for a humanity that you have never lost, Nicholas."

As they watched the priest leave, LaCroix stood and placed a hand on Nick's shoulder. The gesture spoke eloquently of the possessiveness he once again claimed as his right. Nick ignored it, his eyes fixed on the figure lingering at the door. Caine's hazel eyes locked with his another moment, then he was truly gone.

"We have much to talk about, Nicholas," LaCroix breathed close to the younger man's ear.

Nick turned to stare into the pale eyes, his expression openly defiant. "We have nothing to talk about, LaCroix. I should imagine you're going to find the next few years rather dull."

"We shall see, dear boy," LaCroix smiled. "We shall both learn a great number of things in the coming years."

The words, so casually issued, had all the promise of terror that LaCroix could create. Nick knew that madness intimately -- he no longer feared it.

* * *

They weren't quite nightmares, more like uneasy rides through dark corridors of his mind. Peter reached out, seeking something, never quite knowing what it was that was eluding him. His groping fingers touched only air, a thick, unnaturally heavy curtain of air. There was

no one there with him, wherever 'there' was. The realization of loneliness only occurred to him a few times, but when it did, it was a crushing weight of loss that nearly smothered him. Then, the darkness would fade, and the emotion would dwindle into a floating sensation of nothingness. He sensed his own weakness, but it didn't frighten him, simply stirred tiny ripples of discontent, impatience. Then, even that would vanish.

Detached, as if he were only a spectator -- *maybe I am*, the thought formed, then scattered into fragments easily lost -- he sometimes felt hands on his body, shifting him, nourishing him, cleaning him, often merely stroking cool caresses over his fevered skin. Thoughts were too difficult to hold, so he merely ignored the touches, or enjoyed them, whichever reaction seemed appropriate without effort on his part.

Once, during the long sleep, he forced his eyes open, breaking through the barrier of sedation that held him, and he saw only two incredibly ancient eyes watching him. He couldn't see the face, only the eyes, encased in wrinkles, encircled by parchment-thin skin and bathed in a glow that blanketed him with a comfort he could barely fathom. He didn't feel the Ancient's fingers as they stroked down his forehead and across his eyelids, once more closing away the vacant hazel stare.

It was two days after that before he was able to begin coming out from under the layered sleep that had been imposed on him.

The first blur of sight showed him tiny tongues of flame dancing before him, magically suspended on the currents of air that brushed against his skin. His vision turned to liquid, and the individual glows drooled into pools of yellow light, then cleared so that he could finally see them for what they really were -- candles. He was in a room full of candles. That, more than any other sense told him he was at his father's studio.

He blinked against the lingering hold of darkness, and concentrated on focusing his eyes. A form, brown and solid, loomed up beside him, but there was no threat to it. As his sight cleared, he recognised his father, seated crosslegged on the floor beside the cot, watching him with the infinite patience etched into his features that never failed to fascinate Peter.

"Why are you here?"

He was seven years old again, tangled in his sheets, still trembling from the aftermath of haunted dreams, dreams where his mother called to him only to be snatched away on the talons of some terrible bird before his hands could reach hers. Vaguely, he recalled being sick, but it was an elusive memory, no more.

There had been no answer from the silent priest pretzeled into a full lotus beside the cot that had been Peter's sick bed for four days of fever and nightmares.

Peter tried again, forcing the words past a dry throat, "Have you been here ... all this time?"

His father smiled, only the faint downturn of his mouth illustrating the weariness in his face. "Yes," he agreed solemnly.

"But ... you should have rested," the child protested, struggling to a seat in the snarl of bedclothes.

Caine shrugged one shoulder, his head canted into a quizzical tilt. He reached out to still

the automatic protest of his son and brushed a finger over a forehead now mercifully cool to the touch. The smile deepened and finally entered the hazel depths of his eyes as he registered the lack of fever, and he continued the stroke of his hand, smoothing a caress over the small, bald head. "When you need me, I will be with you," he stated gently. "Always."

This time, years later, there was no need to ask why his father was here. He was needed; he was here; it really was as simple as that. With a flick of memory, Peter recognised that even death hadn't kept his father from returning. He shook off the thought as too absurd to consider, and tried out his voice, "What ... what happened?"

Caine stilled him with a touch of his hand against Peter's chest. "Do not try to remember yet, my son."

"No, Pop, you don't understand," Peter protested, trying in vain to sit up against the gentle, but immovable pressure of the hand against his chest. "There are reports, affidavits, cop stuff that needs to be --"

"Peter." The single word held all the authority of fifteen years previous, father to son, an order that anticipated obedience ... and got it. Peter gave up the struggle to rise, and dropped back into the mound of pillows, letting the urgency fade with the effort to steady his breathing. Even the small exertion of trying to sit up had sapped the little strength he had. Caine sat back and waited out the next few minutes, knowing the questions had only been postponed.

As expected, Peter got the next query out with the first easy breath he was able to draw into his lungs. "Where's Nick?"

That answer, at least, was simple, and Caine shrugged. "He has gone."

"Gone? He can't be gone. We have to --"

"He has done what needed to be done, Peter. He has gone home."

"Home?" The word had a faintly lost sound to it, as if it were a foreign concept. "But what about ... " It took a moment, sorting through the muddy landscape of his memory, but the name came, on a wave of dread and latent fear. "... LaCroix ... what about LaCroix?"

"He, too, is gone."

"Gone?" Somewhere under the confusion, Peter realised that he must sound incredibly stupid, but he was beginning to wonder if even simple ideas were too difficult to grasp. Or was the situation just so outlandish that it was beyond his understanding, no matter how hard he tried? "I don't understand."

Again, Caine smiled. "I know. You must rest."

Bewildered, Peter looked around the room. The candles provided the only light, the curtains drawn against day or night -- he had no idea which. "How long was I asleep?"

"Four days."

Peter shook his head. "That's impossible. Nobody can sleep for four days."

There was no answer. The silence and bare shrug told Peter that the information was non-negotiable. He had been asleep for four days.

"There are reports that have to be written, filed, put on the computer."

"Nicholas did them."

"All of them?"

"Paul has ... 'covered' for you."

The reminder of his captain sparked new concerns. "My job. I can't just disappear for four days, Pop. What -- ?"

"Paul has done what needs to be done."

There were still lingering pockets of guilt pricking Peter's memory, as if, somehow, he had been a willing victim. After all, he was a trained cop. He wasn't expected to stand still while a lunatic who thought he was a vampire took a bite out of his neck. Even Stephen King wouldn't touch that plot device. *What the hell had Nick told Blaisdell?* "How much does he know?"

"He knows you were injured and you are with me. Nothing more."

Bit by bit, pieces of the past week filtered in through Peter's cobwebbed mind, unsettling memories of the hotel room, horrifying shards of image from the tiny church. He glanced at his wrist, recalling horrible pain and terror. The skin was clear and unbroken, but when he looked up at his father, he read the pain in Caine's eyes, felt a trace of the agony they had shared in that awful night ... and he saw the guilt.

His own emotions steadied, rolled back into the recesses of his mind and he reached out a still-shaky hand to touch his father's cheek. A single tear welled in Caine's eye, then spilled over. Peter's finger stopped its solitary trail and brushed it away.

"I'm sorry," Peter whispered. "I'm sorry I was the cause of your pain."

Caine shook his head. "He could not have taken you, Peter. Yours is a loving spirit, and ... "

"... and you were there."

Caine caught Peter's hand in his own before it could fall away from his face. He enfolded it into his own hands, idly stroking the fingers.

"What about Nick? Was he okay?"

There was a moment's hesitation, but Caine didn't take the easy out of automatic reassurance. "He will work out his own destiny. It is still in his hands. Perhaps that is all he can ask."

Peter sighed in muted frustration at the response, but, incredibly, sleep was pushing at him again. "I can't remember," he said, half protest, half wistful longing.

"Let it go, Peter."

The objection was immediate, and useless. It rose to his lips, then died there, as even through his disorientation, Peter realised that this was the only way he **could** deal with this. For once, he was simply going to have to accept something on faith, without question. He tightened his fingers around his father's hand, and, sheltered by the touch, let the web of dreams once again blanket him.

* * *

Nick watched his old master from the other side of the elaborately furnished room. This estate was LaCroix's newest acquisition, secluded, elegant, tranquil. Nick would have loved it,

under other circumstances.

"How is Janette?"

The question was unexpected.

LaCroix smiled when he caught the hesitation and uncertainty that leapt into Nick's eyes before the younger vampire could bury the reaction from the sharp gaze that was now settled firmly on him.

"Why does it matter, LaCroix?" Nick retorted softly.

"It doesn't," LaCroix conceded with a laugh. "I was merely making conversation."

This time it was Nick who laughed, the sound low and filled with bitter anger.

"I did warn you that you'd find the next few years rather boring," he commented with clear sarcasm and defiance. He rose from the comfortable armchair he'd been lounging in and left the room without a glance at the pale man who mocked and goaded him every moment of the day and night again.

LaCroix's only response was an expressively arched eyebrow. His gaze grew thoughtful and he turned to look out at the bright blinking lights of Montréal. He reached across the vast distance that separated him from the dark-haired detective he'd very nearly claimed as Nick's replacement. He allowed his mind to skim the surface of Peter Caine's thoughts, felt the barriers Nicholas had placed there to protect the boy. LaCroix could shatter those fragile walls with no effort, would destroy them at a time of his choosing. For now, he would allow both his chosen children to live with the illusion of their security.

"You know better than to fight me, Nicholas," he murmured to the empty room. "You always lose ... "

NATALIE'S WALK IN THE PARK

by: *Lorraine Duffield*

I walk into the golden sunshine and I think of you
standing still, I look around at what you cannot see
pollen from a field of grass swirls and twirls
a ballet of unrehearsed beauty
the bee buzzes and bobs
its stinger is sharp and hurts my tender flesh
holding my throbbing finger to my mouth, my head tilts back
overhead, a canopy of wonder
whose bell jar do we laugh and love within?
we are so ephemeral
even you who has lived 800 years
a mere speck, a flicker
we are gone
reborn in an endless cycle
life never ends
it only changes hands
like a daisy chain we are all linked to one another
draw your next breath
as I exhale mine
nothing to fear
beautiful, perfect harmony
like the clouds over my head
lovely puffs of dissipating vapor
rolling
evolving
changing into its next form.

MENTOR

by: *Denysé M. Bridger*

LONDON -- September 1897

LaCroix walked alone through the cobblestone streets of Whitechapel, the click of his boot heels echoed weirdly in the dark, fog laden air. It had been a number of years since he'd walked these streets; almost a decade, in fact. London's notorious '*Ripper*' had been on the loose that year, and the vampire wondered if the mortal fools would ever discover who was responsible for the series of murders that had held an entire City in a grip of fear. He put the thought from his mind and continued to stroll the familiar lanes.

He'd left Nicholas and Janette just after sunset, intent on simply getting away from the constant bickering that had recently dominated so many of their nights. When they weren't entwined in each other's arms, they argued. Sometimes, they quarrelled when they were engaged in their passion for each other. LaCroix was tired listening to them. His 'children' were becoming a source of genuine irritation. He smiled at the thought. He needed to get away from them -- usually it worked in reverse.

It had been raining for most of the evening, and the dampness clung to the night, made the heaviness in the air a moist, humid veil. The vampire noticed none of this as he walked. LaCroix's senses were alert to every whisper of sound and scent around him. He could hear them as he passed like a wraith through the shadows; the weak, simpering humans who infested the vast City and placed themselves in lofty positions of illusory power. The imbeciles didn't know what power was -- not as LaCroix did.

A terrified scream cut the air, so sudden and filled with panic that the noise actually startled LaCroix. He turned without conscious thought, and saw a young woman bolting from a nearby alley. Close behind her was a man who appeared no more than twenty. In the single glance he spared them, LaCroix noted dark, unkempt hair, gaunt features, and the wild-eyed look the vampire associated with poverty and starvation. Bored, and certainly uninterested, LaCroix resumed his walk. He had taken only a few steps more when he was stopped by a desperate grasp on his arm.

"Please, sir, you must help me!"

LaCroix looked down at the frightened girl and his hand moved automatically to dislodge her grip. She recognised the intent of his gesture and released him with a sob of despair. She spun away and continued to run. LaCroix heard the sound of footsteps behind him and he whirled to face the man who chased the girl. The swish of his evening cape was like a breath of air and the young man stumbled to a halt and stared up at him.

The vampire's silvery hair glimmered beneath the weak, sputtering light of a street lamp,

and the richness of his attire told the boy he'd just found a more promising target for his games. He slipped a hand into his pocket and withdrew the knife that he carried. He held the blade before him and took a step closer to the tall stranger.

"I'll 'ave your money," he said with a cocky tilt of his head.

LaCroix's laughter was dark and ominous. He shook his head, his expression reflecting amusement and contempt.

"You would do well to escape while you can, boy," the vampire counselled.

"We 'aven't finished our business."

"We have no business," LaCroix stated softly. "Now, unless you wish to die this night... Jeremy," he added after a heartbeat's pause, during which he had taken the boy's name from his mind. "I would suggest that you run."

Jeremy, obviously stunned by LaCroix's use of his name, chafed at the stranger's arrogance. He made a leap for the vampire, his fist clutched the knife and wielded it badly. He sliced through air as LaCroix gracefully side-stepped his rush. Jeremy staggered into the side of a building and never saw the approach of death at his back.

LaCroix's hand closed on the back of the youth's neck and his fingers clamped tighter as he dragged his captive into the shadows. He jerked the boy's head back and tore into the exposed neck with inflamed hunger. Sharp fangs pierced yielding flesh, and LaCroix greedily drank the first wash of warm blood that poured from the wound. Jeremy tried to push him away with a weak jerk of motion, and was rewarded by LaCroix's inhuman fingers snapping his neck with careless ease.

Long minutes later, hunger appeased, LaCroix tossed the boy into a gutter and stepped back onto the sidewalk. He felt her stare an instant before he spotted her across the street. The young woman who'd asked for his help had come back. For the second time that night, she surprised LaCroix. He walked through the cloying mist of fog, and she watched his advance but refused to flee.

"It would appear that I owe you my life, sir," she said when he stood before her.

LaCroix smiled. She was controlling her terror very well. Her voice, mostly free of fear now, was a source of interest to the vampire; she had the accent of the aristocracy, not the street. Curious, LaCroix touched her chin, long pale fingers turned her face so that their eyes met. Beneath the grime that clung to her features, he perceived gentle beauty. Glittering emerald eyes held sapphire blue, and the vampire felt his attention roused further by the courage with which she faced him. Her hair, a long, tangled mane of sand coloured locks that flowed to her waist, partially obscured her face, and he lifted the heavy curtain and pushed it aside.

"You're quite lovely," he murmured.

One delicate, wing-like eyebrow rose in eloquent expression, and suspicion flared in the wide green gaze. "And I am expected to be exceedingly grateful for your help, no doubt," she said, her tone bitter, caustic.

The vampire laughed after a split second of hesitation. He shook his head.

"Then what it is you **do** wish as repayment for your assistance, sir?"

"You are far too insolent for one so young, my dear," he said with a ghostly flicker of smile. Displeasure rose in his blue eyes when she laughed back at him.

"Coming from one such as you, sir, I find I feel complimented by your words," she replied.

LaCroix's mood, changing with the rapidity of quicksilver, fluctuated again. His good humour resurfaced and he took her hand then brought it to his lips.

"I am LaCroix," he told her.

She dropped into a curtsey before him, then straightened to again face him. "I am Anastasia Montgomery," she informed him.

"You don't belong on these streets, Anastasia," LaCroix observed.

"Hardly your concern, sir," she retorted softly.

Beneath the sudden intensity of his gaze, she shifted uneasily, barely repressed wrath radiated from her. LaCroix was fascinated. He reached into his waistcoat and withdrew several coins, which he then pressed into her palm.

"I am not a whore to be bought for any price," Anastasia stated, her voice cool and angry. She attempted to return the money to him, but stilled the action when he again shook his head. Blue eyes bored into her, and she shuddered as her indignation faded, and was replaced by inquisitive puzzlement.

"I don't expect you to be my whore," LaCroix assured her. "I do expect you to look as I suspect you are accustomed to when you visit my home tomorrow evening."

"You assume I will not simply take your generous gift and run," she noted with an aloof smile.

"I assume nothing," LaCroix replied. "Tomorrow at eight," he told her and handed her a richly embossed calling card. He watched her read the address and look up at him again.

"You are most unusual, Monsieur LaCroix," she allowed with a slight bow of her head. "But, your arrogance is intriguing."

"As is yours, Anastasia," he responded.

"Until tomorrow night, sir," she answered, then slipped into the night without a glance back.

LaCroix laughed softly to himself as he left the cobblestone street far below and flew back to the vast, expansive estate that was his present home in England.

* * *

Nicholas and Janette were engaged in a lively exchange of words when they entered the quiet sitting room. Their banter was silenced quickly when they spotted their master. Both were startled to see LaCroix at the floor length window, his attention clearly absorbed by something out on the street. He didn't acknowledge their entrance, but the satisfied smile that whispered across his austere features made them cast wary glances at each other.

Before either of them could make the obvious enquiry, the sound of the heavy doorknocker reverberated in the huge foyer and Janette's face clouded with mild displeasure. Before she could turn to answer the summons, LaCroix swept past them and went to greet the newcomer; his guest, evidently. The two younger vampires followed him from the room and peered over the staircase bannister as he reached the massive door and opened it.

Their first glimpse of Anastasia caused another exchange of speculative looks. She was richly attired, a full length, hooded black cape covered her. When she removed the heavy garment, they saw the velvet gown she wore, the colour deep, shimmering emerald, with a froth of delicate ivory lace at her throat. LaCroix took her cloak and draped it across a nearby chair, then he extended his arm to her.

"LaCroix has acquired a new pet," Janette smiled.

"And a very pretty one, too," Nicholas answered, his gaze still settled on the woman who ascended the stairs with LaCroix.

"In a common sort of way," Janette allowed with a shrug. She grinned at the exasperation her remark earned, and slid her arm through Nicholas' as she propelled him forward so they might meet the master vampire and his human companion.

"You didn't tell us you would be having company this evening, LaCroix," Janette remarked as the couple came to a halt outside the sitting room.

"This is Janette," LaCroix told the young woman at his side. "And, Nicholas. This is Anastasia Montgomery," he informed them, a silent warning in his eyes as his look shifted from one face to the other.

"And you did not tell me you had other guests, Monsieur," Anastasia interjected as she smiled a greeting at the couple.

LaCroix led her past the other vampires, and into the candlelit salon. Anastasia glided away from him as soon as they were inside the doors and went immediately to the huge piano that dominated one end of the room.

"May I?" she asked, a visible longing in both her eyes and her voice.

"Certainly," LaCroix answered and went to stand beside the burnished piano. He smiled down at her, and she returned the expression with a warmth that pleased him.

Anastasia ran her fingers lightly over the keys, testing the resonances and tones of the priceless instrument. The sounds were magical in their perfection, and she allowed memory to guide her hands over the ivory keys.

"Schubert," LaCroix murmured a few minutes later. "*Escape to Freedom*," he added when he pinpointed the piece she played. The irony was not lost on him.

"You play beautifully," Nicholas said when she lifted her hands from the keys and stared at the gathered company.

"Thank you," she whispered. Embarrassment spread colour across her cheeks and she looked to LaCroix. "It has been a very long time since I played such an instrument. I'm afraid I was carried away with the moment."

"Then I can only hope you will be carried away again before the evening is over," he said.

Janette watched him, her eyes shrewd. She knew that tone, intimately. It did not bode well for the young girl presently being charmed by the ancient vampire. Nicholas was equally observant of their master's mood.

"You have a lovely home," Anastasia whispered, as her eyes wandered openly over the luxurious decor of the salon. "I feel I must apologise for my behaviour last night, Monsieur LaCroix," she added a moment later when her look rose to meet his amused stare. "I was most

ungrateful for your assistance."

LaCroix laughed, delighted by the twinkle in her eyes. She tried to behave like a lady, but her eyes told him she was more mischievous child than a woman concerned with social etiquette.

"Perhaps it was the possible price our meeting might ask that caused your anxiety?" LaCroix suggested.

"What happened last night?" Nicholas interjected, his interest piqued by the verbal parries.

"Your host saved my life," she answered the former knight, but her eyes never left LaCroix's enigmatic features.

Janette laughed outright and walked around the piano to stare at the vampire. "You should have told us, LaCroix. It sounds like a most unique tale."

LaCroix, in typical fashion, ignored her. He took Anastasia's hand as she rose from the piano bench and led her to a chair near the fire. Her emerald eyes tracked every movement he made as he poured a glass of white wine and brought it to her.

"Who are you, my Anastasia?" he asked once he had taken a seat opposite her.

"A waif from the street, sir," she grinned. "A very lucky one."

LaCroix shook his head. "The truth," he requested with quiet demand.

Anastasia glanced at the others, her interest held by theirs. LaCroix acted as though they were alone within the softly lit room. Nicholas smiled at her, and came forward.

"Janette and I are attending the ballet tonight," he told them. "It was a pleasure to meet you, Anastasia." He raised her hand to his lips. Emerald eyes shone back at him, and her smile was shy.

"Yes," Janette chimed in. "I hope we will see you again. Goodnight, LaCroix," she concluded with a wicked smile at the master vampire. "Enjoy your guest."

* * *

"They are a most unusual couple," Anastasia observed when Nicholas and Janette had left the room and shut the huge doors behind them.

LaCroix's eyebrow rose, but he made no comment.

"You have no family?"

"Are they your family, Monsieur?"

LaCroix nodded, the smile on his face a mixture of sincere amusement and mild affection.

For several minutes, she remained quiet and thoughtful, then she sighed and her green eyes captured his again.

"I have a mother, a stepfather, and several younger brothers and sisters, Monsieur LaCroix."

"LaCroix," he murmured.

She inclined her head, and continued. "Several months ago, I was forced to leave the house in which I grew up. I have not seen my family since then. A decision made by them,"

she whispered. Pain rose in her heart, and she wondered if there would ever come a time when the rejection did not hurt this profoundly.

"Why?" LaCroix, to his considerable surprise, found he was genuinely curious. She was intelligent, and lovely -- and as soon as the thought formed, he surmised the answer to his query.

"As I said, I have a stepfather. My mother married him little more than a year ago, only six months after the death of my father. Lord Bertrand Ashton is a boorish, overbearing swine, and my mother lives in fear of him. Shortly after they were married, Lord Ashton informed me that I would share his bed whenever he desired me. When I declined his *offer*," she used the word as if it were bitter on her tongue, "he then invited me to leave my home."

The answer was much as LaCroix suspected, and he leaned back in his chair to watch the play of emotion her disclosure had awakened within her expressive face.

"You have no friends who would take you into their homes?"

"None who would not ask questions that I prefer not to answer," she told him candidly. She laughed then. "I have told no one these things in all the months I have been separated from my family. Yet, I have told a stranger my secret."

"Which would imply we are no longer strangers," LaCroix smiled, one eyebrow raised in ironic pleasure.

She nodded and rose, set her glass on a low table, then walked slowly around the beautiful room. "I miss them," she confessed. "My friends, and the children. The evenings at the opera and the ballet, and the theatre. I adored the theatre."

"Would you like to attend the opera again?" LaCroix enquired. He planned to attend a new performance the following night, and she would be a far more enjoyable a companion than either Nicholas or Janette. Her enthusiasm was refreshing, and her youthful blood promised him a pleasant *répas*.

Again, the flare of unmistakable suspicion rose in her eyes, made them as hard as the gemstones to which they bore such striking resemblance. LaCroix's laughter was chilling, and the edge that crept into his voice was clear warning when he spoke to her.

"I am not this man you fear, Little One," he snapped. "If I wished to bed you, we would not be discussing the opera."

The bluntness brought an instantaneous stain of scarlet to her cheeks, and LaCroix felt a twitch of hunger rise with the very audible pounding of her heart.

"What is it you *do* want from me, LaCroix?"

"You assume you possess something I would want," he countered with faint scorn. She was charming, but he had little patience with misplaced arrogance.

Stung by his manner, and very definitely humiliated, Anastasia glared at him.

"Anything I possess is precisely that, sir," she retorted. "My possession. You have been kind to me, and I am grateful, but I wish to leave now."

"You may leave when I tell you to," LaCroix responded quietly, his rich, alluring voice like a silken caress. He held her gaze as he rose and went to stand before her. Green eyes grew dazed and adoring as he smiled down at her, and she nodded, easily bent to his overpowering will. LaCroix was enjoying himself.

Anastasia took a step back as he released the hypnotic hold, and she stared at him in momentary confusion. She put a hand to her forehead, and tried to remember what they had been discussing.

"Sit with me," LaCroix directed, and took her arm. When he settled into his chair again, without letting go of her wrist, she dropped to the floor and curled up at his feet. Laughing softly, LaCroix's fingers brushed over her smooth, fashionably coiled hair. He tugged the knot loose and sand coloured locks tumbled over her shoulders. Anastasia looked wary, but she said nothing.

"You haven't told me if you wish to attend the opera tomorrow evening," he reminded her.

She searched his face for some hint of his thoughts, then gave up the effort as beyond her. With her customary candour, she simply asked what was on her mind. "Why are you being so kind to me?"

"You interest me," he answered with disarming honesty.

"In what way?" She hesitated for a moment, rallied her courage, and pressed further. "You claim you have no wish to..." Her words stumbled awkwardly, and she took a deep breath, then looked directly into the deep blue gaze that held her captive. "There must be something, LaCroix. I have never known any man to offer a gift without the expectation of receiving something in return."

"I am not like any man you have ever met, Little One," he told her, as one long pale finger traced the curve of her mouth. The quiver of response to his touch reminded him of the enticing warmth of her blood. Still, something held the hunger at bay. He hadn't yet discovered what drew him to her, and LaCroix wanted that answer before he claimed her life.

"No, you are not," she agreed. "But that does not mean you are different, does it?"

"How old are you, child?" he wondered.

"Eighteen," she informed him. "Hardly a child."

LaCroix laughed at the absurdity of her statement.

"You enjoy laughing at me."

"You make it so delightful."

"I do not enjoy it."

"You are not expected to."

"You answer questions with more questions, LaCroix," she said sharply. "Is it so difficult for you to give what you take so freely?"

"What do you think I want from you?"

"I don't know, damn you!" she hissed, furious at his mocking manner. When she would have risen, his hand on her shoulder held her in place.

"Careful, Little One," he advised, voice a whisper of icy air.

* * *

The rest of the evening was spent in a strange sort of harmony. Anastasia told him in detail about her life, played the piano for him, and listened eagerly when he finally spoke to her

of some of the many places he'd been.

It was nearly dawn when Janette and Nicholas returned. They came into the salon, expecting to find it empty. Instead, they discovered LaCroix, seated in a chair before the fire. His right hand combed through Anastasia's flowing hair as she slept at his feet, with her head on his thigh.

Janette was openly amused, though the hint of surprise that flickered in her large blue eyes was not missed by either of her companions.

"Why have you brought her here, LaCroix?" Nicholas asked. His look was fixed on the sleeping angel at LaCroix's feet, and her innocence seemed to reach out to him through the blanket of unconsciousness that enshrouded her.

LaCroix glanced at the girl, then smiled at Nicholas. "Your concern is touching, Nicholas. But, she is quite safe, as you can see."

"Yes, but for how long?" the knight wondered.

LaCroix could feel the approaching sunrise, and he bent to wake her. Anastasia smiled up at him, and he pulled her to her feet as he stood.

"Come, Little One," he whispered. "It is time for you to return to your home."

"You need not leave here," she told him, noticing his other guests had returned, and also seeing the faint blush of predawn pink in the sky outside the floor length windows.

LaCroix didn't argue.

As they reached the doorway of the salon, Anastasia glanced back at the others. Her gaze lingered briefly on Nicholas, then she smiled weakly at Janette. "Goodnight, Nicholas," she paused, then added with a tiny bow of her head, "Mademoiselle." Her hand came to rest on LaCroix's arm, and she followed him from the sitting room.

LaCroix walked her to the door, draped the heavy cloak over her shoulders, and hailed a nearby cab for her. Before she climbed into the waiting hansom, she reached into her small purse and dropped into his hand the coins he'd given her the previous night. She leaned up to place a brief kiss on his cheek, then quickly got into the cab.

* * *

From the windows of the salon, Nicholas and Janette watched the exchange.

"What kind of game is he playing at now?" she hissed.

Nicholas pulled the curtains shut and said nothing when LaCroix strode into the room moments after the bang of the front door closing echoed through the house.

"She is quite pretty, LaCroix, but I cannot imagine why she still lives," Janette observed after a moment's silence filled the room with noticeable tension.

"Because I wish her to," he replied coldly.

"LaCroix -- "

Before Nicholas could finish his thought, LaCroix's glare silenced him. The ancient vampire looked from one uneasy face to the other, then left the room without another word to either of them.

* * *

The following evening, LaCroix again sent for his newest amusement. He knew she would be ready to go with him to the opera, and she did not disappoint him. The hansom he'd hired stopped in front of the main entrance to his estate, and he went to greet his guest.

Anastasia twisted a dainty lace handkerchief nervously, and felt her breath catch in her throat when she got her first clear look at LaCroix. He was magnificent, she thought. The elegant black and white evening suit he wore was set off to perfection by the midnight coloured cape, its silver lining shimmered as it fluttered in the light breeze.

He settled next to her and thumped the roof of the cab with his walking stick. As the hansom moved forward with a tiny lurch, she found she was unable to meet his gaze. LaCroix's touch at her chin forced her to look up at him.

"You are quite beautiful tonight, Anastasia," he murmured.

"Thank you," she replied, inordinately pleased by his approval.

LaCroix permitted her to look away. As she stared into the growing darkness of approaching night, he let his appraising eyes look more closely at her. The heavy black cloak she'd worn the previous night had been replaced by another of heavy purple velvet. Snow white gloves covered her arms almost to her shoulders, and a bracelet of glittering diamonds and amethyst sparkled from her left wrist. She had chosen a gown of pale violet silk, and the low neckline revealed an appealing amount of ivory skin. Small breasts rose and fell as she tried to remain immune to his scrutiny. The lace entwined in her fingers was in shreds, and he took one small, gloved hand in his. She turned instantly at his touch.

"How long have you been alone?"

"I have one friend to whom I have now been truthful," she answered. "It is Meredith's generosity that has enabled me to spend this night with you, LaCroix. All that you see is hers."

"Then I must thank her for her benevolence," he said with a smile. "We have arrived," he added minutes later as the cab slowed and came to a halt outside London's exalted Royal Opera House. He stepped from the hansom with graceful precision, then turned back to lift Anastasia. His hands remained at her waist for a moment before he released her and offered his arm.

She hesitated and stared at the grandeur of the ancient building. From their position on the sidewalk, she was able to see the vast number of people who milled in the lobby. Panic filled her with sudden dread. LaCroix's voice made her cry out in surprise when he spoke close to her ear.

"What is it you fear, Little One?"

She stared up at him and made an effort to appear much calmer than she truly felt. He spent enough time laughing at her, she thought in a minor fit of pique, she need not give him further excuse for his amusement.

"I am merely feeling overwhelmed, LaCroix. It has been a long time since I last stepped foot in this House."

LaCroix knew it wasn't the truth, but he graciously allowed her the lie. He touched the small hand that rested on his arm, his own gloved fingers covered hers entirely. They went into

the Opera House, and heads turned as they passed. They were, indeed, a most striking pair. LaCroix's lips curved into an indulgent smile as he watched her head rise proudly, and he sensed the reemergence of the arrogance he'd seen in her the night they met.

After he had seen that their cloaks were stored, he returned to find her attempting to read the Italian announcement that proclaimed the night's performance.

"Do you wish to learn the language, Little One?" he asked and smiled when she turned startled eyes to him.

"You would be my tutor, LaCroix?" She sounded doubtful, and he laughed at her again.

"You will be amazed at the things I may teach you, Anastasia," he commented, then dismissed the topic from his mind.

"Would you like to go inside?" he asked a short while later. She had nodded greetings to various people who passed, but made no move to stop them or engage in conversation. Before she could formulate an answer to his enquiry, he felt the surge of panic that paralysed her. The light hold she had kept on his arm became a clutch, and his eyes narrowed as he sought the source of her fear.

"Who are they, Little One?" he demanded when he spotted the couple who strode toward them. The woman was lavishly dressed in deep, royal blue, but it was her anger that made her most noticeable to LaCroix as it arced across the rapidly diminishing distance that separated them. The man at her side was a pompous, swaggering cretin, LaCroix decided at a glance. But, the ancient vampire also felt the violence that lurked within the man. He knew their names in the moment before they stopped and glared down at his shaking companion.

"What are you doing here?" the woman snapped, her voice brittle and harsh with the depth of her fury.

"I am attending the opera, as you are, Mother," Anastasia replied.

Her voice was steady and low, cannily hiding her fright. LaCroix smiled his approval.

"Who are you, sir?" Lord Ashton questioned sharply.

"That is hardly of any concern to you," Anastasia retorted as her rage began to blossom.

"Anastasia!"

At her mother's admonishment, she relented and was quiet.

"I am LaCroix."

"And, I, sir, am -- "

"Lord Bertrand Ashton," LaCroix interrupted smoothly. "I am aware of your name. Anastasia has spoken of you both," he told them, though the tone of his voice implied the notice was not entirely favourable to them. Ashton's lascivious gaze was fixed intently on the frightened child at LaCroix's side.

Lord Ashton bristled beneath the arrogant tone.

"I would advise that you not take **all** her confidences seriously, monsieur -- "

"But I do," LaCroix inserted smoothly. "I listen to all she has to say. It is what makes her such a charming companion."

"And, you to me, LaCroix," she whispered. Her eyes danced with merriment as she looked up into the sparkling blue of his gaze.

"So, you are this man's tramp!" Lady Ashton hissed.

"Would you rather I belonged to this pig you so foolishly married?" Anastasia asked, her low voice tense and filled with unmistakable loathing. "LaCroix has been kind to me, Mother. He saved my life, and has chosen to give me this gift. He has asked for nothing in return for his generosity. I am grateful. But I am not his possession."

"Not yet," Lord Ashton muttered. His dark eyes gleamed with malice as he eyed the silver-haired man who watched the women with ill concealed mockery. "She is hardly worth such expense," he sneered to LaCroix.

The vampire laughed, and his smile grew deadly when Ashton's face brightened with a florid stain of indignation.

"Her worth, as you put it, is not a matter I wish to discuss, Lord Ashton," LaCroix informed them, his deep, silky voice icy with derision. He dismissed the other man with a shift of his intense look. "You chose to allow this man into your home, Lady Ashton," he continued, his blue eyes boring into the frightened hazel gaze of Anastasia's mother. "Your child is mine now."

Before they could say anything further, LaCroix led his companion to the wide staircase and they headed to the upper level of the vast Opera House.

* * *

"You should not have provoked him, LaCroix," Anastasia whispered once she was seated next to him in the large, private box. "He knows many people who could do you harm."

"He knows none who could cause me harm, I assure you, Anastasia," LaCroix laughed. "Is your mother always so easily beaten?"

"She has always been irrational and demanding," she said sadly. "My father often remarked on her inability to behave in a way that he found acceptable."

"Perhaps that is what she has in common with her new husband?" LaCroix mocked.

"She is a fool, sir," Anastasia stated coldly. "But, she is still my mother."

"Your loyalty is charming, Little One. But, misguided."

"I wonder if you would feel this way had I chosen not to honour your place at my side this night?"

"You are a bright child, Anastasia," he said softly. "Which is why you know better than to make an enemy of me."

The warning was unmistakable, and she quickly fell silent. For the remainder of the evening, her attention was held in equal measure by the performance, and the man who sat next to her. LaCroix appeared bored and uninterested in the show; Anastasia wondered why he had come to the Opera House. The only time he spoke was to answer her questions when she didn't understand some part of the dramatic presentation. He clearly enjoyed her desire to learn, and she was increasingly enchanted by his vast knowledge and patient manner.

* * *

In the weeks that followed, Anastasia became a frequent visitor at the vampire's estate.

Often she would sit at LaCroix's feet, enthralled by the tales he told her. Nicholas and Janette found themselves ignored and given much more freedom than was LaCroix's usual wont in such things. They enjoyed their master's distraction almost as much as he, but for vastly different reasons.

"It is almost dawn, again," Anastasia sighed when she looked out the window. She had enjoyed this night tremendously, for she had spent the latter part of it not with LaCroix, but alone with Nicholas.

"Do you wish to stay?" Nicholas asked. He'd been with the master vampire and his young companion most of the night, and had quickly discovered the reason for LaCroix's interest in the girl. She was a lively and willing student -- the perfect pet for LaCroix's need to dominate. Nicholas didn't pretend she wasn't doomed, but he did find that he liked her company when LaCroix was not within her orbit. She bowed to the vampire's will at a glance, and Nicholas had voiced his irritation more than once when he'd seen her humiliated by his master's laughter.

"I should say goodnight to LaCroix before I leave," she said, as though she hadn't heard his invitation. The master vampire had left them a couple of hours ago, and his absence left her feeling disoriented and alone.

"I think he may have retired already," Nicholas told her. He had, in fact, heard LaCroix's return a short while earlier. He'd been mildly surprised when the vampire didn't return to the library where he'd left Anastasia. When she yawned and offered him a sleepy smile, Nicholas took her arm and led her from the room.

"Why do you let him treat you so carelessly?" he asked as they walked through the silent corridors. He was genuinely curious, because he had come to expect her temper when she was treated like a mindless fool. For several moments, they continued to walk in silence, then she laughed. The sound contained a clear note of melancholy, and it reminded Nicholas of what her life had been like before LaCroix's curiosity had changed her circumstance.

"I have discovered, Nicholas," she murmured thoughtfully, "that I would rather be a rich man's pet than a poor man's whore." She waited for his response, and he easily read the flutter of fear in her wide green eyes. She was attempting to be much more flippant than she truly felt. He made no comment, and she relaxed again.

"There's a bedroom you can use at the end of the hall," he told her. They climbed to the third level of the vast house, and Nicholas led her to the entry. He opened the door and gestured for her to go inside.

"You are very sweet, Nicholas," she whispered, and felt a rush of warmth in her cheeks as her words registered within her mind.

"Sleep well, Anastasia," he smiled gently at her confusion, then kissed her cheek.

* * *

It was midafternoon when she woke, and Anastasia felt a tiny flutter of panic when she looked around and saw the unfamiliar room in which she'd slept. It took a second to remember that Nicholas had escorted her to this room. She rolled onto her back and smiled. LaCroix's

house was beautiful, and in recent weeks she had grown to love her nights. She had not felt truly happy since the day she'd been forced to leave her family home. But, in LaCroix's company, none of that pain seemed able to touch her. The gentleman had become her mentor, and she adored him for his kindness to her.

Then, there was Nicholas. She had never met such a handsome and sensitive man. He made her laugh and feel things she had never before experienced. For a moment, as he had watched her close the bedroom door, Anastasia had wanted him to come into the chamber with her. Alone, she still blushed scarlet at the remembered longing she had felt. Nicholas never laughed at her -- not the way LaCroix and Janette did.

A rush of excitement coursed through her and she slid from the bed, suddenly restless. She had never seen the house in daylight hours, and she heard no sounds of activity when she opened the heavy door a crack and peered into the hall. She ran back to the bed and scooped up the dressing gown that had been placed there -- by Janette, she assumed. She tied the belt at her waist and shut the door as she slipped out of the room.

Her wanderings took her all over the sprawling mansion, and she eventually found her way back to the upper corridor. She passed the line of solid oak doors, and tried to decide which of the rooms belonged to Nicholas, Janette, and LaCroix. She ran her palm over each panel of rich, lustrous wood she passed, as if her touch would enable her to identify the room's occupant. She hesitated outside one that was opposite her temporary bedroom, some inner voice was urging her to open this door. With a quick glance over her shoulder to see if she was being observed, Anastasia took a deep breath and turned the knob.

The door swung inward soundlessly and she smiled, the response involuntary. Feeling distinctly guilty, but drawn in spite of that, she walked to the bed. Her breath caught in her throat as she stared down at the sleeping knight. Nicholas' fair hair seemed to shine like golden light, even in the shadowy atmosphere of the chamber. His face, smoothed into peaceful sleep, appeared innocent and young. Anastasia moved to the other side of the bed and gingerly sat on the richly embroidered coverlet. Again, drawn by a need beyond her conscious control, she reached out and touched Nicholas. The soft silk of his hair slipped through her fingers and she leaned over him to place a light kiss on his temple.

For a long time, she sat and watched over him. Until her own drowsiness made her lie down. She was unable to tear her gaze from his face, and when sleep gradually threatened to overcome her again, she rose and made her way back to her room.

She didn't notice the tall, forbidding figure framed in an open door at the far end of the corridor. Sapphire blue eyes snapped with fury as he watched her creep from the former knight's bedroom. LaCroix's stare transformed into golden fire, and a low, hissing growl rumbled deep within his throat.

* * *

LaCroix was impossible to please tonight! Anastasia thought as she fought back another flood of tears. He'd strode from the library nearly an hour ago, and she hadn't the courage to follow him. He was attempting to teach her another language, she had already mastered the

basics of several others. His current choice, Spanish, was causing her problems. She continually confused it with Italian, and his usual patience was nowhere in evidence. He had barely spoken to her outside the sneering ridicule he'd lavished on her for her inadequacies.

Nicholas had gone out earlier in the evening, and Janette lounged in the sitting room. Anastasia whirled in fright when a light knock on the door brought her out of her miserable reverie.

"Anastasia?"

It was Janette. She quickly dried her eyes and offered the beautiful woman a smile as she came into the library.

"He has upset you," Janette remarked as she joined the vampire's student. "LaCroix can be a most demanding master."

"I have never seen him this way," Anastasia said, and managed to keep most of the quiver from her voice. "He is usually so understanding. Nothing I do pleases him this night."

"Perhaps you should stop trying so hard to do what is not truly possible," Janette counselled.

"It is not always difficult to please him, Janette," she replied softly, her loyalty instinctive. "He wants very little in return for his generosity."

Janette laughed at the naiveté in her words. "LaCroix's price is a high one, Anastasia. Have no illusions about that. He will not ask, he will simply take whatever he wishes. It is his way."

Anastasia felt a chill caress her spine, but she refused to believe Janette. With a shake of her head, she closed the subject.

"I think I should leave," she decided. "I... Please, tell him..." Again, her voice trailed off and uncertainty filled her features when she looked at Janette.

"I will tell him you have gone home," Janette assured her. She walked toward the staircase with the young girl, and wondered how much longer LaCroix would torment the child before he claimed her. They had reached the top of the wide, curving flight when Anastasia turned to look at her.

"Do you know where Nicholas has gone?"

Janette's eyebrow rose when she spotted the yearning in the green gaze that anxiously awaited her answer. Could this be why LaCroix was so short-tempered with his pet? Anastasia spoke of Nicholas like a woman in love, her emerald eyes soft and wistful when she said his name.

Before Janette could choose a reply, she felt his presence. She glanced up to the bannister that ran along the upper level. LaCroix watched them, his expression distant, unreadable. Janette sensed the dangerous mood he'd slipped into, and knew.

"Join me, Anastasia," he requested. The compelling tone left her no choice but to obey, and he watched her leave Janette and climb the stairs that would bring her to him. Janette's eyes never left his as she measured his intention, then turned away in a swirl of flowing black silk. He walked back to his bedroom and knew his prize dutifully followed.

* * *

"I am sorry, LaCroix," Anastasia said as she hovered just inside the door of the luxurious chamber. Candles were lit, and the soft radiance gave the large room a deceptive feeling of safety and warmth. Her look darted over the heavy wooden furnishings that gave the bedroom its distinctive appearance. When her gaze connected with the piercing blue of LaCroix's eyes, her stomach lurched wildly within her.

"I was much too impatient, Little One," he replied. "But," he continued, and allowed his tone to become icy with the depth of his anger. "You should not have betrayed my trust, Anastasia."

"I have not betrayed you, LaCroix!" she cried in horror. "I would never -- "

"Come here, Anastasia," he ordered and held out his hand to her. When she stood before him, he let one finger trace the gentle curve of her cheek. "I will have what should have been mine alone, Anastasia," he promised darkly.

"Please, LaCroix," she begged. "I don't understand."

"Do you love Nicholas, Little One?"

The ice in his beautiful eyes reached out to her, and froze her heart within her chest as she stared at him. She swallowed hard and shook her head.

"You cannot lie to me," he admonished, his tone mocking and faintly regretful.

"I do not lie, LaCroix," she whispered fiercely. "Nicholas is my friend. I care for him. But it is not love as you seem to imagine it."

LaCroix's laughter was terrifying, and she shrank back from him when he reached for her.

"We shall soon see, Little One," he hissed. "I think you will be my whore this night, Anastasia." He said the words softly, the tone a whisper of lethal pleasure. Emerald eyes grew huge as she began to understand the sincerity of his decree.

She screamed, the sound a shrill note of fear and heartbreak. She made a desperate run for the door and a second shriek spilled from her lips when LaCroix's arm encircled her waist and lifted her off her feet. Anastasia's vision blurred as the candle flames swam out of focus with the swiftness of his movement. LaCroix flung her onto the massive bed and she sobbed when her gown was ripped and pulled from her shuddering body.

"No, LaCroix! Please!"

The vampire's elegant manner had vanished, and as she pleaded with him he slid the silk dressing robe off his broad shoulders. Pale skin looked like sculpted marble as he leaned over her, and her face reflected her terror as she saw his nakedness. She shook her head repeatedly, tears streamed from her eyes and she tried vainly to push his hands from her when he began to strip her of the white undergarments she wore. He slapped her hard across the face and for a second, the room faded to black.

His hands were everywhere, touching her in places that made her choke with horror and revulsion. "No..." It was a low moan of denial and LaCroix silenced her instantly when his mouth descended on hers. His tongue invaded and probed with hungry lust as the soft body trapped beneath him writhed in terror-enhanced rejection. His breathing was becoming strained as the hunger rose within him, and he pulled away from her to stare down into shock-dazed green eyes.

"I did not betray you," she sobbed.

"Lying slut," he snarled, again with the eerie softness that incited such horror within her huge eyes. LaCroix's hands grabbed her hips and he held her firmly as he plunged into her body without warning. Anastasia's back arched and her scream of agony echoed in the stillness of the vast house. LaCroix knew as the fragile barrier of her virginity was torn away by his invasion that she hadn't lied to him. The faint scent of blood teased at his aroused senses and he continued his rape as he leaned into her neck and sought the pulse of life that would feed his true hunger.

She tried to squirm away from him, each thrust of his hips felt like a knife that tore her insides. Her fingernails clawed helplessly at his back, but he was oblivious to every attempt she made to dislodge him. She felt the stroke of his tongue at her throat and new panic preceded knowledge. The scream that rose inside her was never voiced as LaCroix pulled her head back and she saw what he truly was. Blue eyes were a golden inferno that seared her very soul, and he smiled down at her to reveal fangs. Her eyes rolled back as his mouth closed on her exposed throat. This pain was sharper than the one before it, and as her awareness began to fade she heard him drinking her life while his powerful body moved against her in a macabre danse of death.

* * *

Janette shut her eyes as the child's screams reverberated through the cavernous mansion. Nicholas would have been enraged had he been home, she knew -- yet, some part of her wished for his return. She was so lost in her uncharacteristic remorse that she did, in fact, miss his arrival.

"What's he done to her?"

Startled far more than she should have been, Janette almost dropped the glass of wine she'd been toying with for most of the past half hour. The house was quiet now, but it was not the peaceful silence than had pervaded their home for much of the past month. Now, in the aftermath of LaCroix's violence, it felt more like a tomb.

"You know what he's done, Nikola," she answered without discernible emotion.

Nicholas spun on his heel, Janette rose and ran after him as he took the stairs three at a time. She was only a heartbeat behind him when he burst into the master bedroom. She stumbled to a halt and was insanely relieved to note LaCroix's absence.

Nicholas walked to the bed, his face grim and devoid of reaction. Janette could feel the barely contained loathing and the real despair that he tried to bury when he stared down at the broken body. Janette stood at his back and she shuddered when she got her first look at the delicate child LaCroix had destroyed.

"Why?" Nicholas hissed through clenched teeth. "She would have done anything for him."

"She would not have loved him, Nikola," Janette told him. "Her heart belonged to another. LaCroix will not tolerate that, as you well know."

"That's ridiculous, Janette!"

"Is it?" she countered softly.

Nicholas couldn't take his eyes from Anastasia, despite his not wanting to look at her. The stain of blood between her thighs told him the master vampire had taken her innocence before he had taken her life. That knowledge created a tremor of hatred within him. How long had it been since LaCroix had taken any mortal like this? Their master rarely deigned a mere mortal worthy of his touch in this way. He preyed on humans like they were animals who existed only to serve his hunger. That he would take her as a lover would made no real sense to the knight.

"She loved you, chérie. That is why he did *this*."

Nicholas finally tore his gaze from Anastasia and turned incredulous eyes to Janette.

"It's true."

Nicholas closed his eyes and wanted desperately to deny her assertions. He recalled the light scent that had hung in the air within his bedroom that evening. He had thought it a remnant of Janette's presence, but he now knew it had been Anastasia's. She had come to him throughout the day, and he had not known.

"I should have seen it," he whispered.

"This is not your fault," Janette said impatiently. "We knew what he would do the moment he brought her here. It is the nature of the beast, Nikola. And LaCroix does enjoy what he is."

Her casual dismissal of Anastasia's life hardly came as a surprise to Nicholas, but he was infuriated nonetheless. He walked from the room without a word.

* * *

Anastasia's body had been returned to her family for burial. The sizeable sum Nicholas had sent with his condolences had insured that they asked no questions. Their passive acceptance of her death further enraged the former knight, but he forced himself to concede the inevitability of what had happened.

LaCroix had not returned to the estate.

Janette grew increasingly petulant, and Nicholas brooded.

Three days after the girl's death, LaCroix reappeared.

Shortly before midnight they heard the tread of their master's steps and both pairs of blue eyes narrowed in anticipation of an angry confrontation.

LaCroix swept into the room, his bearing regal and carefree. He looked at his children and one eyebrow rose in wordless enquiry.

"Where have you been, LaCroix?" Nicholas asked the expected question.

"Making arrangements for our departure."

Janette straightened in her chair, her face revealed the extent of her combined confusion and suspicion.

"What are you talking about, LaCroix?" she snapped softly.

"We leave for Paris in two days," he stated and left the room as swiftly as he'd entered it.

Anastasia Montgomery was never spoken of again in LaCroix's presence.

THE POETICS OF

MARY CATHERINE SCHISLER

As I did with my last zine, I'm going to include a brief bio of the featured poet, since it is her work that is comprising the centrepiece of the book. Mary Catherine is a talented lady, and I think you'll enjoy her poetic visions as much as I have . . . (And I hope she'll forgive me for the liberties I've taken in condensing the bio she sent me!)

Mary Catherine was raised in Windsor, Ontario, Canada, and attended school there and in Detroit, Michigan. She is a commercial artist, with an extensive background in design, public relations, and fashion illustration. Mary Catherine is married, and the mother of two children, Christine and Paul.

Always having a passionate interest in architecture, Mary took a sabbatical from work to take her daughter to the great cities of Europe: Paris, Vienna, Amsterdam, Munich, and others. A highlight of one of her various trips abroad was to visit the British Museum in London, to gaze in wonder at the Elgin Marbles, the celebrated sculpture which once adorned the Acropolis in Athens over a thousand years ago.

With her children grown, Mary pursued her own interrupted studies, and entered the University of Windsor, taking courses, while continuing to work part-time. Eventually, she decided to concentrate fully on acquiring a degree in Classical Studies, Modern Languages and Civilizations. In 1988, she graduated with a B.A. from the Faculty of Arts. She is presently pursuing an additional degree in Communication Studies and Visual Arts, specializing in Film Theory and Criticism. Mary also serves on the Board Of Directors of the Organization of Part-time Students, (OPUS), at the University of Windsor, and soon advanced to become its President and acting as its Executive Director.

Mary's most recent satisfying involvement/activity has been her writing, which has been inspired by FOREVER KNIGHT. She will be publishing her first volume of poetry, dedicated to the 'Knight', in the Spring, and hopes to embark upon a second in the very near future.

Good luck with ALL your endeavours, Mary Catherine, and Thank you again for giving me the opportunity to showcase your talent.

ABYSS

Inside the silence of my mind
you come to me in need
bringing your scent, your skin
and your throbbing lust
which you pleadingly place
at my feet.

In my mind I abandon
all reserve and modesty
and drive down all caution
to contain my welling fears
while unfolding freely my essence
fully to you.

My swelling breasts
burst their bonds of silk
because of your probing and
determined touch
I hover between heaven and earth
until your kisses claim my soul.

You enter me with an urgent driving force
that thrills my most secret inner place
as it heightens my self-awareness
to the pain and joy
of an all-consuming hunger for you
which leaves me satiated unto death.

I cannot will my passions to subside
to turn away from my aching desires
in danger of destroying the world I've known,
I'm cast beyond time and space into an abyss
of broken and erotic dreams . . .

where I await your summons . . .

BLOOD AND KISSES

Night
its deliberate, darkening magic
cautions a recklessly beating heart
I'm captured
in a powerful, disorientation
that blinds reason and discards hope.

A hidden meaning
at first too obscure to fathom
a reluctant realization begins to surface
its import still vague, opaque
rushes headlong into consciousness.
It's you.

What are you
an entity, foreign, exotic, stunning
encapsulated within a dark, deadly force
beckoning, yearning, longing
craving my hot, sweet, compelling blood
my soul.

You are Temptation
too powerful to resist
a fact that cannot be denied
nor contained
my body rhythms tremble
in wake of the impending onslaught.

Fervent burning kisses descend
upon yielding flesh
and devour
all resistance to eventual doom
what unearthly premonitions cower
in corners of fear.

It's too late

much too late to escape
I'm caught in a rush of blood
of love
helplessly suspended, then submerged
I'm lost
in the all-consuming vortex of you.

BROKEN TRUST

I died in your arms last night
and travelled to a place I've never been
it was a miracle made of love
it was heaven
what promises, what wonders lay before me
to captivate and beguile my anxious soul.

Now, I'm yours forever and beyond
tell me how it will be
this new life you have brought me to
to live immortal
with no constraints of time and place
a wondrous adventure or death's ironic finale.

Abandoned, no pathway to guide me
the memory of our lovemaking holds no solace
am I to wander from century to century
damaged, afraid and homeless
an eternity of loneliness looms ahead
what a fool was I to trust...

my vulnerable, hapless heart.

TO LOVE A VAMPIRE

Nothing seems what it appears to be
a spiritual angst comes
from looking for love
in all the wrong places
and always just missing
because fate has shut the door.

Now I feel completely exposed
I've lost all sense of control
and merely submit
it's so raw
I feel the intensity
and grasp its danger.

It's fragmented
in a way that life is fragmented
made up of broken mirrors
of shattered glass
with shards that shred my fragile soul
and pierce my already wounded heart.

To take the risk is to die.

THE PRECIOUS GIFT

Two lovers
embrace in the darkness
in the throes of sexual passion
the atmosphere crackles with erotic electricity.

Oh, why
do you arouse me so
she moans.
Because I want you
he replies with masculine arrogance.

He smiles
and his lips curl back
revealing deadly white fangs
that gleam in the shimmering moonlight.

I need you
he demands with authority
wild eyes burning with lustful urgency
his powerful grip immobilizes her growing fear.

His kiss upon her throat is soft
full lips caress its silken curves
groaning, he deftly pierces the milk-white skin.

Her blood
thrills him to his innermost being
sweet as wine, it flows freely though his veins
intoxicated, he revels in its power to sustain him.

Aftermath
his arms enfold her lifeless form
in awe of its fragile, translucent beauty
he shudders at the realization of his selfish act.

Resolution
remorse replaces his terrible need
lingering, he reflects on the impermanence of life
her gift humbles him, a silent prayer escapes his lips
in a hallow benediction.

CHASM OF LOVE

I know that you want me, my enigmatic lover
you know that you can have at your pleasure
my breasts heave and my nipples grow taut
when you descend and advance close behind me.

The curves of my buttocks excite you
there are hollows that you love to explore
my waist aches for your hands to encircle
and my shoulders long to cradle your head.

All that I am, I abandon to your touch
you travel the length and breadth of me
no cleft, valley or orifice escapes you
every pore cries out for your flesh.

Take me to your bed, I murmur with desire
I need you to consume my entire being
set me on fire as you always do
I want to convulse at your thrusting.

Deliberately, you bring me to a fever pitch
I'm gasping for breath at the onslaught
your intensity bursts forth in growls of lust
and I arch as you pierce my tender neck.

My blood rushes into your gulping mouth
your thirst makes you swoon at the flood
I feel a deep chasm opening...
catapulting me into the Orgasm of Death.

DANCE INFINITUDE

We have received an invitation to a dance
where one can outlast aging at every turn
its timeless rhythms conjure up fateful memories
but no memorable memory is left in mind.

Its youthful vitality versus enthusiasm
with intricate footwork and frenzied arabesques
in sync with the desperation in the beat
its drummer, Father Time, tapping out the tune.

Each generation takes its turn around the floor
holding their partners close to their heart
intently listening to the thunder of their blood
as it reverberates and spurs on the lust.

This interminable dance will soon end in death
and one follows the steps as best as one can
every pas de deux has its twists and leaps
when the music fades, the silence rings hollow
and dammed.

No movement remains to be seen or felt
except for the quivering of a dying pulse
then the music resumes its frenetic pace
lurching towards disharmony and dissonance.

(inspired by "If Looks Could Kill")

FÊTE NUIT

A hanging moon
silently escapes
across a scarred, wine sky
to hover beneath swollen clouds
sheltering evil
stalking
the mass of wanton revelers
masked and whirling

to death's rhythmic beat.

Hidden under
a casual, cruel guise
so quicksilver and unobtrusive
a disdainful, aristocratic manner
none question
the intense riveting gaze
the fiery eyes
burning, that burrow
deep beneath feeble defenses.

Not long
'till a hapless encounter
grasping a tender waist
the pulsating beat signalling fear
moist, fragrant skin
an aphrodisiac of the senses
sighing softly in denial
no longer cautious but careless
a prey to be devoured.

Unfurling
to the drumbeat of blood
no compulsion to hide
sharp and merciless weapons
that syphon the stream of life
and engorge in a selfish repast
no longer driven to ravage
but satiated and bloated
discarding the leavings
to the vacant night.

HOPE

Forgotten whispers chasten the soul
making masters of death's darkening power

Evil carries no unwilling burden
Yet love hastens the goal.

Hear clearly that clarion call
sharp, distant and reeling
Without truth, life's meaning departs.
leaving only despair and feeling.

By day candour reigns supreme
no dimming light left unextinguished
Reality strengthens our survival
where aching and yearning hold sway.

Can our heart's desire find peace unending
for without love death conquers all
Bitter and cold we will fall from grace
our only redemption from mortal resolve.

KNIGHT DAY DREAMS

You are alone with me
here in my dreams
in the daylight.

I hold you close
and kiss you
a thousand times.

I can see
the bright sunlight
reflected in your hair.

And trace
its shadow patterns
on your breasts.

I can feel

your sun-kissed hands
warm my skin.

And how
your hot lips
feel on my cool cheek.

I see myself
mirrored in the sun-flecks
of your eyes.

And marvel
how your soft skin
glows in the sunshine.

How I wish to greet
the morning sun

and never fear its deadly rays.

My love, you are the sun
in the fullness of life
that I embrace in my dreams each night.

Whereas, I am the Knight
cold as death
trapped in a dark nightmare
with no reprieve in sight.

MAJESTY

High atop
a gleaming tower
an elaborate nightscape
stretches out before me
a galaxy of sparkling, flashing lights
from a metropolis of teeming souls.

All I survey is mine
cognizant of unparalleled power
and cruel dominion
a will to unleash
my deadly hunger
on all who stray
within my sphere.

No fear
bars my way
not bound by mortal confines
yet with patience to treasure time
vowing to take all I desire

and revel in my nature
I recognize no force
beyond my need...

I am free
to be.

TO LOVE A VAMPIRE

Nothing seems what it appears to be
a spiritual angst comes
from looking for love
in all the wrong places
and always just missing
because fate has shut the door.

Now I feel completely exposed
I've lost all sense of control
and merely submit
it's so raw
I feel the intensity
and grasp its danger.

It's fragmented
in a way that life is fragmented
made up of broken mirrors
of shattered glass
with shards that shred my fragile soul
and pierce my already wounded heart.

To take the risk is to die.

VAMPIRIC CURSE

What is immortality
but an empty hourglass
drained of immeasurable minutes
with nothing meaningful to measure.

Should we salute immortality
for its victory over time
or its flight from reality
while plummeting toward tragedy.

Is *immortality* a mystery
a strange alluring bewilderment
or an evil influence
descending into decadence.

If immortality is magic
then it's a dark, dirty trick
played upon the weak and innocent
with eternity its vanishing act.

Immortality may be a raging battle
its beginning so simplistic
but to end it is impossible
with memories as sharp as weapons.

Is immortality not a crime
perpetrated by the subversive
upon the unsuspecting and loveable
the result, imprisoning love.

In denial, *immortality*
fosters acute desperation, frustration
for it covets the intangible but
is destined to become inconsolable.

Thus, immortality harbours loss
by nurturing insatiable desires
always seeking, never possessing
elusive human love.

Immortality is infinite
a continuance of nothingness
interminable, relentless aloneness
bereft of hope, salvation
and everlasting peace.

A FINE CREDULITY

Mortality resides in a trembling place
tenuously on the edge
there are those with vanity not to believe

and others with compulsion toward dread.

That anything is possible aside from this world
a fine credulity, and yet
kept in check by skepticism and reality
they do exist. The Walking Dead.

It should not be too difficult to comprehend
that lives might be unlived apart
at a distance and having independence
without humanity's ability to chart.

Would you also have a mind to believe
that becoming a nocturnal creature
might not be all that it's vaunted to be
in a world unknown beyond nature.

Through a deadly, unwelcome transformation
they walk along the paths of winds
amid the murmuring midnight choir
their unholy, unnatural unlife begins.

In their dark and evil personification
with a near-death, hypnotic charm
we cannot avoid their vampiric grip
only our faith and courage deflects harm.

Not haunted by acts too horrible and profane
they exist without conscious guilt
ravaging mercilessly among the living
we now heed the fear that they instill.

Yet, some are seared by a life unlived
trapped within an eternal hell
in spite of the remorse and disgust it brings
nothing can wrench them from its evil spell.

Can we have pity allied with crushing fear
when human lives are at risk
we must defy these vile, unhuman beings
and pray for heaven's power to resist.

BREATH OF CONSENT

An extinguisher of youth and beauty
hovers outside my boudoir door
myriad lines and wrinkles waiting to bestow
additional slackening curves lie not far beyond
with a once slender waist now in sharp decline.

Preservationist be my saviour, please
take me from this present decaying state
into the blossoming fullness of prime of life
with Father Time no longer nipping at my heels
but nearer to the breath of your consent.

(inspired by "If Looks Could Kill.")

CAPTIVE

A fine madness
has overtaken me
seduced by luxury, silk sheets
soft music and fine wines
delicacies served on silver trays
rare orchids in every room
an enthralling but deadly lure.

I can't eat, sleep, think
my heart is racing
spurred on by your blood

whispering: your mine, forever mine
held fast in a mesmerizing embrace
a bond stronger than steel
encases my will.

With expert ease, cool fingers
trail across my naked breasts
kisses of persuasion follow
that inflame my thirst
and stir up forgotten memories
of a life unlived
before you.

Enticed
by tiny sips of blood
you awaken discordant dreams
an insatiable lust for blood
never loosening your velvet grip
like an evening moth, I'm pinned
captive in a collector's case:
a trophy of desire.

COMPANION

Like a god
from out of nowhere
you appeared to us
as if a vision
a wonder to behold
reflected by the golden glow
of shimmering firelight:
a knight in moral armour.

Your beauty
dazzled and astounded
thrilled us to the core

pure and spiritual
in your tabard of virginal white
with burnished curls
forming a halo
'round your boyishly
angelic face.

Not wanting
to alarm you
hesitating, then with cunning
we devised a masterly plan
to steal your soul
a prize too valuable

not to treasure
for ourselves alone.

Take you we did
through the power of lust
an irresistible lure
one you could not resist
vulnerable as you were
with wounds invisible to the eye
foreign battles
having scarred your heart
and temptation lingering nearby.

Transformed
and forever ours
we gloried in our precious prize
a willing consort to share
the erotic encounters
of nightly adventures
to delight in our nature
and indulge in our unearthly desires
to love and kill without regret

-- no longer alone.

THE DROWNING POOL

Once I saw someone who looked like you
downtown one night
in a club
it was dark
sultry with rhythm.

He was casually leaning on the bar
confident, not drinking
engrossed in conversation
with an exotic beauty.

I watched intently from across the room
he held her with his eyes
like a lover would
I felt my heart crack open.

Suddenly in an instant he was gone
I reached out to touch him
as he passed by
but my knees buckled, my hand fell.

Now I'm with you in this private dim place
not surprised, I have lost my voice
and my will
not wanting to resist you.

I feel your pervasive power and danger
slowly immobilizing me
with an intoxicating fear
to merge with you.

I think I will die from wanting you
my heart is pounding
in deadly synchronization
with your hot breath.

My lips hunger for your seductive mouth
I need kisses of reassurance
you hold me tighter still
and turn my head to bare my throat.

Now I am being absorbed by your darkness
undulating waves of pleasure
wash over and pull me down, down
to drown in my pulsating blood.

THE FOUNTAIN

She stands before him
naked, unafraid and defiant
like a prize
to be won, not conquered.

Her beauty is luminous
incredibly rare, sensuous
embrace
which takes his breath away.

Her height, tall
her form, shapely, curving
aristocratic
in demeanor, yet supple.

Dark hair, wild with curls
falling, entangled
about smooth, rounded shoulders.

Breasts, full and uplifted
skin as radiant
as a fragrant, ripe plumb
delicious, taunting him.

Beauty is no stranger
to his ever-waiting bed
by all accounts, her fate is sealed.

No one refuses the master's
pressing invitation
and those who do
never live to tell the tale.

With force he draws her
to him, while
grasping both her wrists
behind her rigid back.

He feels resistance
to his demanding
yet she does not cry out for release.

Her eyes meet his
in a challenge of wills
her haughty courage
touches his hardened heart.

Weakening under
his persistent, piercing gaze
she yields to his searching hands.

Her throat speaks
softly with a throbbing beat
that makes him dizzy
with desire.

Searing kisses
ravage her upturned mouth
and breathy gasps escape the parted lips.

He buries his restless fingers
deeply in her lustrous hair
and sweeps away the waves
to hungrily stroke her pliant neck.

His tongue is deft and probing
as he tastes her pulsating throat
delicately, he sinks his aching fangs
into the tender, luscious flesh.

Thus, she has become
as others long before her time
an erotic fountain of flowing blood
to quench his unsatiable thirst for love.

HUNGER

In searching
for the ultimate high
they must first get inside your head
they'll seduce your senses
and rape your mind
taking the soul as hostage to bed.

There is not a thing
anyone can possibly do
to resist
once they've embarked upon their quest
they'll rent your body
limb from limb
and never pause to rest.

Impatient with thirst
they lay it bare
your ripe pulsating heart
eager to savour its bloody flavour
not fearful
yet anxious to depart.

Piercing its flesh
to reach its inner core
the fluid flows, alluringly bright
gulping in the life-giving thread
they luxuriate
before retreating in flight.

Never a day
passes them by
that they do not lick their lips
for when the Hunger calls their name
they hesitate not a bit
but not until they select their prey

is their action merciless and swift.

The Hunger is fierce
ensnaring them to the full
it's not a pretty sight
so you must prepare
to flee their midst
or fate will crush your life.

LIBERTY

Once, free as an eagle
I soared to infinity;
now I have been grounded,
yet you say you love me.

You say you know best
what I must do and see,
and you hold me back
and won't let me be me.

Silly, isn't
that I should want liberty
when you promised love
and have not the least charity.

What a fool was I
to place my trust
in another's power
"to amaze and disgust."

I must be mad
to go on day by day
not a particle of compassion
do you extend my way.

You let me suffer

never giving care or thought
to what I'm going through
or my need to stop.

If you really love me
you'd set me free
and not try to keep me
from the life I need.

Instead, you choose to sully
all that we shared
to make parting difficult
as if I erred.

This folly must end
I need to breathe
If you force my hand
I swear I'll break free.

So, it comes to this
I must wrench away
to make a new life
in spite of all you say.

Would it not be better
and kinder still
to wish me luck
and bid a fond farewell.

It makes me sad
and full of pain
to think we'd part
never to meet again.

Oh, how I wish
you really loved me
instead of just wanting
to possess my immortality.

When I'm transformed
into mortal life
I shall not remember
this all too bitter strife.

But will recall
deep within my mortal heart
the love you gave me
from the very start.

Love's a rare gift
freely given and deeply shared
not for control
nor to maim or impair.

I did love you, you know
in my own special way
and my feelings for you
will never dim or slip away

So, say goodbye, old friend

it's time for me to leave
I too will mourn
just as you will grieve.

NIGHT MUSIC

What are the sounds
that make up the music of the night
the rush of the wind
the rustle of leaves
the flutter of wings
the cricket symphony
the silky murmurings of ripples on the lake
in full accord, the woods are alive with
quivering life...

The night is heady with aromatic scents
its fragrance induces ephemeral dreams
the slash of a crescent moon courses silently
across the velvet of a clouding sky
and keeps watch like an eye in the night.

Cloaked by the darkness, he quietly awaits
watching and listening for his careless prey
who may by chance pass that way
the air is pungent with expectation
and still, she does not come...

A hidden bower promises a trysting place
for vampiric lovemaking, the Rite of Passage
cold, he craves for the warmth of her flesh
a sudden internal reflex signals a warning
in the distance, he hears the crush of leaves.

She is here. Seductively, he calls her by name
in an instant beside her, he calms her fears

and declares his love in a soothing voice
she does not resist when he grasps her by the waist
with a low growl, he pulls her to his leafy bed.

Enthralled, she abandons herself to his urgency
and he deftly releases her voluptuous breasts
which he consumes with a surprising hunger
her body arching in response to his skilful touch
she convulses as he brings her to orgasm.

Fully exposed, her skin glistens like alabaster
he absorbs the vision in the soul of his mind
the throbbing of her throat inflames his thirst
and he falls upon her to enact his deadly rite
skilfully plunging into her pulsating skin.

Her blood flows freely into his greedy mouth
drinking deeply, he drowns in its richness
drunk, he reels in the ecstasy of the moment
nothing equals the infusion of the Life Force
fully satiated, he revels in his manhood and power.

A cloud passes suddenly over the sliver of moon
and the night is submerged into inky blackness
a funereal quiet envelopes the atmosphere
far away, a mournful howl permeates the calm
and the woods, once again, are alive with
quivering life...

SCARLET RIBBONS

A beautiful stranger
calls to me from within my mind
in my imagination, in a fantasy
as if in a dream.

It's very dark

inside my mind, I'm blinded
no depth perception to guide me
except desire, a compulsion drawing me.

I hesitate to take a step
or return his beckoning gaze
fearful premonitions rush past logic
to crowd my trembling heart.

Now he's here beside me. I'm lightheaded
his presence is intoxicating, overpowering
I want to drink in the scent of his skin
and absorb him through my pores.

His strong cool fingers
Send shivers along my bare arms
my body resonates with anxious expectation
no earthly power can release me from his grip.

Enveloping me, his breath
upon my cheek is fragrant and inviting
his moist lips part
and ravenous kisses devour my mouth.

They descend upon my welcoming flesh
and press down on my throbbing throat
subduing all resistance to death
within my fragile soul.

I feel him shudder
at my silent scream of rapture
when he pierces my neck
sending rivulets of blood
cascading
 down
 my naked
 breast.

UNLOVED

This seductive universe
in which they live
an erotic, electrifying otherworld
shrouded in darkness
inhabited by refugees from daylight
whose presence is barely felt
so swiftly do they strike and run.

Its deadly mystery
of unbridled passions
acknowledged only by a few
within a circle of conspirators
they plan their nightly conquests
and execute them unopposed
unafraid, unfettered by conscience.

Dwelling on the fringe
of life, love and companionship
the walking alienated
immersed in a dark and decadent existence
are relentless in an urgent quest
to pursue their unquenchable thirst
for unattainable human love.

A MOTHER'S PRIDE

by: *Lorraine Duffield*

He had followed, with curiosity, the actions of the woman in the park with the baby. Every night she came by at the same time, baby in stroller, to walk along a well practiced path. There were few deviations, if any. They would slowly make their way past the lake, sometimes pausing to laugh at the sleeping ducks. Then they would head under the tunnel that even the joggers shunned in the light of day. But, she never did.

Unmolested, she would visit all of her usual spots before leaving the path to return home. He sometimes wondered why this woman would take a baby on such a solitary outing at night, rather than in the full light of day. Then he would pause and think that perhaps this was her second or even third journey of the day. How should he know, he was Lucien LaCroix, a vampire, and couldn't venture out in the sunshine to find out for himself.

Curiosity got the better of him. He hired a mortal to trail the woman for a week. Once again, no deviations. 7:00 a.m., the baby went to daycare. 8:00, Mama arrived at her job as legal secretary for the firm of *Hinckney & Burman*. Mama was an O'Connell but the baby, unofficially, was a Burman. LaCroix didn't ask his snoop how he came across that snippet of information.

One day, however, the woman hadn't gone to the park, but had remained at home giving her statement to the police. Her home had been broken into and burgled. LaCroix had rewarded his employee with neat twin puncture marks, the man's usefulness spent. *Well, at least in that capacity*, the vampire thought, delicately blotting his lips with a crisp handkerchief.

The woman arrived home at exactly 5:30 each evening, according to the unfortunate snoop. Then nothing -- until her walk.

LaCroix was starting to get bored with the whole thing when he began to notice another item of interest. The woman was spending an increasingly longer amount of time in the tunnel. Every so often, he'd see the illumination of artificial light bouncing off its walls. He normally hung back or flew over the hill the tunnel cut straight through.

Not wanting to give himself away prematurely, he chose not to dog her footsteps too closely. Until he detected the sound of scraping one night.

She went into the tunnel, as always, and the flashlight beam cut on. The sounds started and went on for about five minutes. *Scrape . . . scrape . . .* Then the sound of an object being moved, followed by a muted crumbling. *Scrape*, once again, object being moved, silence. Soon, the stroller wheels were set in motion.

Every night.

Thereafter, it was the same, except the sounds of objects being moved increased.

LaCroix noticed another intriguing thing. The soil underfoot in the tunnel had started to become looser, instead of packed like it had been before. He decided to explore the tunnel further. Gazing around casually he noticed, behind some creeping weeds, the signs of her activities. There, three feet off the floor were several loose bricks. He pulled them out and discovered a small cavity dug into the dirt behind the carefully placed bricks. Brow wrinkled in consternation, he replaced the bricks and left the dark, tomb-like space, deep in thought.

He called Nicholas to him, who was less than pleased at the summons.

"This had better be good," Nick said, in lieu of greeting.

LaCroix paused in the middle of wiping down the wooden surface of the bar. He ran a hand along the top of it and sighed.

"I'm going to have to have this thing revarnished, the wood's beginning to pucker. Didn't Janette take care of this place?" he asked pensively. Silence. He looked up.

"I'm waiting," Nick said, the very picture of impatience.

"Moody again Nicholas? Doesn't it get old?" LaCroix mocked.

Nick's fingers began to strum a rat-a-tat rhythm on the newly cleaned bar surface.

LaCroix sighed. "I need a favor."

"Why didn't you come to the station, or the loft? I am on duty you know?"

Shaking his head, LaCroix explained, "I couldn't take the risk of someone seeing me at the station, and this couldn't wait until you get off duty. What I am about to ask you is in the strictest confidence," the ancient vampire warned.

Interest piqued, Nick waited for him to continue.

"I need you to look up anything on a woman named Janice O'Connell, she works for *Hinckney & Burman*. Don't have some flunky do this for you, find what you can, by yourself, and get back to me as soon as possible, preferably tonight." LaCroix leaned forward, eyes shifting suddenly to gold. "Don't disappoint me, Nicholas."

Nick was utterly flabbergasted. He almost opened his mouth to object, but urgency flowed from LaCroix in waves. He had given Nick his trust and, for some perverse reason, Nick found he didn't want to violate it. He simply nodded to LaCroix and walked out the door.

* * *

It didn't take long after all.

The woman's history was almost completely an open book. Until he reached the sealed psychiatric report. Knight easily circumvented the safeguards, all the while covering his tracks. He read the report twice, then backed out rapidly. Grabbing his suit jacket, he rushed past a startled Tracy Vetter.

* * *

LaCroix wasn't surprised to see Nick enter The Raven so soon after their earlier meeting. He was, however, taken aback by Nick's swift, purposeful stride in his direction, the look of concern on his sensitive features.

"What is this woman to you LaCroix?" he demanded.

"She's nothing to me. What did you find out?" LaCroix asked, contradicting himself in the space of a single breath.

"Leave her alone, she's been through enough," Nick challenged.

"Nicholas . . . " LaCroix was growing impatient.

Nick contemplated the older vampire for a brief moment, then relented. He told LaCroix everything, including the contents of the psychiatric file.

It was no longer a mystery why the woman was digging the tiny crypt. Still, something LaCroix's conscience couldn't let her do it. He thanked Nick, absently, intent on leaving the bar. It was close to the time of her nightly walk. Tonight would be the night, he was certain of it. He would have to fly. Nick stopped him with a hand on his arm.

"Why do you care, LaCroix? This concern of yours really isn't your style."

Intent on reaching the park before it was too late, LaCroix's answer was less guarded than usual.

"He's a child, Nick. I know what you think of me, that I care about nothing. But, you're wrong. I care about a great deal of things. The most important of which, is my family."

Nick shrugged. "So, what does that have to do with this woman and her child?"

LaCroix exhaled in annoyance, anxious to be on his way. "He is not a vampire. He may never be a vampire. But, he will decide between life and death, and what he wants to be. If that day ever comes, it will be his choice. I will not let her make it for him. She had that opportunity before he was born."

Nick's grip on LaCroix's arm tightened.

"I have to know what you are going to do."

LaCroix shook him off, features tightened in cruel anger.

"I have to know what you're going to do."

LaCroix shook him off, features tightened in cruel anger.

"Don't get in the way, Nicholas. This is my business. I alone will determine the outcome." He conceded one point. "I promise, no innocent will suffer tonight."

He turned from the bewildered Knight, and left the club.

* * *

LaCroix took to the night air; his vampire ears could hear the chime of midnight bells all over the city. That was what had intrigued him from the start. The woman's stroller walks with the baby were always begun at midnight. What mother in her right mind would endanger an infant with a walk through a deserted park at midnight? Knowledgeable as he was of the dark things in life, he'd known immediately that she was up to no good. And, the father in him didn't like it one bit.

He settled to the ground just as she entered the tunnel. He heard stroller wheels squeak to a stop, then the rapid scrape, scrape, scrape of the bricks being displaced. Soundlessly, he approached her. She reached into the stroller and lifted out the baby. LaCroix's heightened eyesight discerned the boy's features in sharp detail. He allowed himself a momentary twinge

of sadness. Nothing had happened which was the child's fault.

The woman propped a foot on the pile of bricks, to bend a knee. She held the baby high above her. LaCroix was there in a flash, correctly determining her intention. He snatched the child from her hands.

"What the hell?" O'Connell cried out in astonishment and fear.

LaCroix's lips curled back over sharply curving fangs.

"Hell is right. You'll be there momentarily. But I want to hear it from you first. Why?"

"What right do you have to judge? Do you know what it's like to take care of a child like that?" She grimaced. "He's so ugly. All he does is eat, sleep and defecate. That's all he'll ever do. I'll be wiping up after him forever." Her features twisted in rage. "All I wanted was to help some poor couple. How was I to know about family genetic defects." She shook her head. "He held me to that damn contract. One 'healthy baby boy'," she snorted. "Never mind that it was his sperm, his child as much as it was mine -- I was the legal parent."

She put a hand on the stroller and started to rock it crazily. "I received child support. Two thousand dollars a month." She bit her lip, sudden tears springing into her eyes. "As if money could take away the look in people's eyes when they bent down to look at the baby. He's a disgusting, pathetic freak. My burden for life. Well, no more."

She lunged at the baby.

LaCroix simply pushed her back against the wall, like swatting a fly. He pulled the blanket away from the baby's face, studying it carefully. His voice, when he spoke, was low with contempt, "Has it never entered your pea brain to get this child some plastic surgery?" he questioned, as if speaking to someone of limited intelligence.

"Yes," she said. "Certain expensive treatments. Everything I own would eventually be mortgaged to the hilt. My insurance coverage would be exhausted. My life ruined. Just to fix a child I didn't even want." Her voice began to quaver in self pity.

LaCroix was at the end of his patience.

"Then why not give him up for adoption or put him in an institution? Why kill him?"

The woman was truly nonplussed.

"Give my baby to strangers? What kind of mother would that make me?"

"That's what you're worried about?"

LaCroix was appalled.

"What other people would think of you?"

The vampire held the child close to him, unable to explain, even to himself, just why this child's life was so important to him. When times had been tough, he had been known to actually curb his appetite with such a small scrap of humanity.

Come to think of it, maybe it wasn't so hard to fathom. He killed to survive. Well, maybe sometimes for sport. But never children in that instance. This woman's motives were purely selfish.

He pulled the stroller toward him and carefully placed the baby within. He adjusted the blanket to loosely cover the baby's face. No need for the tot to witness what must be done.

It was swift and looked like an accident. No one who saw the scene later would doubt

what she had been about to do. It would look like dumb luck, or Divine intervention. The ice pick she had used to dig out the crypt had instead penetrated her own black heart, after she tripped on a brick.

He had to leave the baby, there was no way around it. The child's cries would bring people running eventually, he figured.

In the end, he was wrong.

Nick arrived soon after LaCroix had prepared the final details. A quick frowning survey confirmed that Nick was too late.

"You should have held her here until I showed up!" he snapped angrily. "You didn't have to kill her!"

"Don't be stupid, Nicholas. You know what would have happened. Even if she did go to prison, she would be out soon enough. After she was declared psychologically fit to reenter society. The child would have been taken from loving foster parents and placed back into her custody."

Nick shook his head. "You don't know that for a fact. Besides, perhaps in jail she could have gotten the help she needed."

LaCroix looked at him in derision. "He would grow up with nothing, no affection, no love. She'd have taught him that no one could ever love him. He'd hate himself."

The baby began to cry. Without conscious thought, LaCroix picked up the baby. He soothed the child awkwardly. "Would you deny this boy the promise of something better?"

Nick was speechless. He didn't have the heart to taunt the ancient vampire for his sentimentality. Would wonders never cease?

A police siren cut off nearby and Nick held his hands out for the child. LaCroix handed him over, somewhat reluctantly. Their eyes met in a moment of genuine understanding.

"Go on, get out of here," Nick urged as footsteps sounded close to the entrance.

LaCroix was gone in a blur of motion.

"Nick?" Tracy Vetter called out uncertainly.

"Over here, Tracy." Nick held the child close to his heart. "The mother is dead," he announced grimly, when she reached his side.

"Oh my God!" she exclaimed, flicking the beam from her flashlight over the body sprawled on the ground.

"I found her like that. She's only been dead a few minutes."

Tracy turned to him, expression filled with confusion. "How did you know?"

He lied quickly. "Anonymous tip. Someone called to say something strange was going down here. Unfortunately, I wasn't fast enough."

She nodded. "So, that's why you told me to get here as fast as I could. What was going on?"

"Take another look," Nick prompted.

Tracy took in the hole in the wall, the pile of bricks, and the ice-pick embedded in Janice O'Connell's chest. Comprehension dawned, followed very quickly by disgust. "She was going to kill her baby and brick him up in this wall? That's so inhuman. What kind of mother could do such a thing?" she asked rhetorically, biting her lip to disguise the fact that she was on the

verge of tears.

Nick stroked the baby's head. "What indeed?"

* * *

In the end, the baby didn't go into foster care.

Belatedly, the father discovered paternal feelings of love and protectiveness and brought the child into his home. LaCroix kept his own fatherly eye trained on the family. If there was any mistreatment . . .

Well, some things are better left unsaid.

With Himself monitoring the situation, if anything **did** happen, there would be LaCroix to pay.

VENGEANCE

by: Tracy L. Essam

She watched him from the rooftop as he got in his car and sped away. *Whose life will he ruin today?* For a thousand years she'd been happy, content to be who and what she was. He'd changed that. With his beautiful face and his sad eyes, he had infected her. She should have protected herself sooner, isolated herself from his pain, his impossible quest. But it was too late now. By the time she had realised his effect on her resolve, there was nothing that could be done. She had tried in vain to get away, but it was past that; there was no way to run from the disease with which he had infected her.

She'd fought as hard as she could to keep the contagion from warming her cold heart, but the inevitable had happened -- it had won out and the thing he had longed for she had attained. The illness had affected her brain, made her think for a heartbeat that she was happy with the turn of events; she had even allowed herself to love.

But fate is cruel and even as she had accepted her fate, rejoiced in the change, the man who had warmed her heart had been taken from her. It was then that the plan had formed. She hadn't realised it at first, not consciously, but it was there, developing in the back of her brain -- the ultimate release -- true immortality - death.

But even that he had denied her. She had begged him to let her die but his own selfishness would not let him and he had taken the sickness, the humanity, away from her -- and restored her to her former glory, a little colder and lot wiser.

She had suffered so much pain because of him. He who had professed to love her had tortured her with his own demons. Willingly or not he had done it -- and he would pay.

* * *

It had been three months since that terrible night. Tracy had asked him if what he'd done had been the right thing, and even now he wasn't sure. Janette had asked him to let her die, but as she fell into the dark pit of unconsciousness he couldn't let her go. She was one of the few constants in his ever-changing, never-ending life. He needed her, needed to know she was alive. Because of it, he had betrayed her dying wish and brought her over - again.

He'd not seen her since that night. She'd opened her eyes and looked at him with eyes he never thought he see aimed at him - eyes of hatred, and flown off. Even LaCroix had sworn no knowledge of her whereabouts.

"Are you with me Nick?"

Nick smiled down at Natalie. "Sorry I was just thinking"

"Of her?"

Nick nodded.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"I just don't know if I did the right thing."

"You know my feelings on that one."

"I couldn't let her go, Nat. We'd shared so much together. She was the thread that held me together."

"Together? Or to the vampire community?"

"Nat, that's not fair. She's been gone three months, before that almost a full year, and it hasn't changed anything."

"Do you really think she's gone for good?"

Nick couldn't answer her. He didn't know where she was, only that she was near. He'd lied to Natalie -- there had been a change in the past three months. He could feel himself slipping back into his vampiric habits. Janette was effecting him, he couldn't put his finger on how, but he knew it was her. That first night, the re-emergence of her portrait, the one Leonardo had painted. A few nights later, a book she'd given him was waiting for him on his bed. A week later, an old note. The objects hadn't stopped appearing. They'd all been tokens of memories he had of her, and their un-life together. They were causing him to feel the one thing that could, *was*, pulling him ever so slowly back into the darkness - doubt. The thing to make him hesitate and re-assess his goals. A desire to return to what he was -- to what he'd had -- to her!

* * *

She sat up on a rooftop, gazing down at him. She could feel his mood darken. Smiling to herself she knew he was wrestling with the same emotion that she had - doubt. The past few months had been carefully planned and executed so, this moment would come. His disease had turned on him. His journey to mortality had brought him the human emotion of doubt, which would lead him right back to his starting point.

As she watched him, her heart softened for a brief moment, floods of memories invaded her mind. He had searched so long for freedom from the darkness. And, in that split second she chose to let it go. No more would she watch him. For better or worse, his life was his. She had caused him pain and setbacks -- she was vindicated. With one final glance she took flight and left for Paris

* * *

"Nick? I'm sorry I should never have asked you that question." Natalie's voice cut in to Nick's thoughts.

Suddenly he smiled at her.

"She is gone Natalie . . . for now."

I WILL BE UNDENIED

by: *Lorraine Duffield*

Death consumes him.
Looking in the mirror,
He sees its cadaverous maw.
Screeching for him.
I'm coming for you Nicholas.
Hold me off as long as you can.
You will fill my embrace.
As I shred your soul to tatters.
Mocking your pleas for mercy.
Your feeble attempts for atonement.
You know my name.
Say it
Whisper it
Fear it
Surrender to it
It is LaCroix.

THAT WHICH BINDS US

by: *Denysé M. Bridger*

EDITOR'S NOTE: The following story is the final chapter in an on-going series that was appearing in a publication called KNIGHTBEAT. Because of letters I've received about the conclusion, I've decided to include it here. If you're not familiar with the series, all you really need to know is that Gabrielle Sinclaire is LaCroix's lover, they have a history of almost three hundred years. She has died for him, protected him when Nick would have destroyed him, (the threads of the 'DARK KNIGHT' episodes were woven into one segment), and was eventually sent away by him when she refused to help him seek his revenge on Nicholas. This story is set six months after the night he sent her from him, and promised to call her back.

* * * * *

OTTAWA, CANADA -- Spring 1994

"I think you should reconsider, Ms. Cross."

Gabrielle stared for a moment, still conscious of the momentary confusion that she felt whenever someone addressed her by the new name she'd chosen. A name that reminded her each time she heard it that she was without the soul of her existence. LaCroix had sent her away from him almost six months earlier. She felt sick and empty without him. When she wasn't consumed by bitterness and unreasoning rage.

"I will not reconsider," she stated coldly, as she registered the expectancy on her assistant's features.

"Why?" Karla Jansen asked, her tone a mixture of exasperation and genuine curiosity. She sat on the edge of Gabrielle's desk and searched the other woman's beautiful face for an answer she didn't expect to receive any other way.

"Jared Langdon is a smart businessman, Karla. He wants *The Ad Campaign* because we're good at what we do here. But, I didn't start this company to end up working for someone else. I thought you understood that?" Gabrielle challenged softly.

"That part I understand, Ms. Cross," Karla nodded. "But it's an awful lot of money to toss aside without at least considering his offer. He claims he has no intention of interfering in *Campaign* affairs."

"Then why would he want us?" Gabrielle snapped, careful to conceal any hint of her own knowledge of the C.E.O.'s probable motives. She let out an impatient hiss and turned away from the woman who looked at her like she'd lost her mind. Gabrielle stalked over to the window, gazed out into the night, and ran her hands through the heavy tangle of her hair. "I don't intend to discuss -- "

Ice flooded Gabrielle's veins and froze her words as effectively as her actions. For several seconds the entire world was held suspended in a vortex of chill and dizzying weakness. Her head fell forward and she shuddered violently. She would have fallen if Karla hadn't grabbed her and eased her to the floor.

"What's wrong?!"

The frantic, concerned voice penetrated the shadows that surrounded Gabrielle's mind, and the redhead forced her vision to clear. Karla's face swam into focus, and Gabrielle laughed softly, the sound more a sob than she realised.

"It's nothing, Karla," she slowly assured her assistant. Gabrielle leaned back, her head touched the solid wall behind her. She dragged in a deep breath, and tried to find the source of her weakness. She hadn't felt anything like this, ever. It was terrifying. Yet, there was familiarity to the icy shadow of precognition that lit a thrill of anticipatory excitement deep inside her. She clung to the thread of hope, momentarily, then made her heart accept the much colder reality of his absence. Again, Gabrielle was jarred from her moodiness by her assistant's sharp voice.

"Nothing?" Anger textured the word, and Karla stood to loom over her employer. "You damn near fall out the window mid-sentence, and I'm expected to believe this is nothing?" She didn't mean for the words to spill out so harshly, but they hung in the air between them, and she felt a whisper of cool fury rise from the woman who stared up at her. Karla had seen Ms. Monica Cross angry before, and it hadn't been pleasant -- she'd been fortunate before, the redhead's wrath hadn't been directed at her. Her luck had just run out.

Gabrielle rose slowly and faced her assistant. She ignored the shaking that threatened to put her back on the floor, and gathered her strength inward.

"I'm not going to continue this, Karla," she gradually said, voice tight with restrained rancor. "Because it's late, and I know concern is what's motivating this outburst. But," she went on as she stepped closer and held the nervous gaze with her own, "if you take it upon yourself to continue pushing me into joining the Sheraton Corporation's family of businesses, you will be looking for another job. Am I making myself clear?"

"Very," Karla stammered. She sagged back against the desk when Gabrielle turned away and peered out the window again.

"Go home, Karla," Gabrielle directed softly. "It's almost dawn, and you're expected to arrive at the shoot by two p.m."

Karla hesitated for an instant, then decided it wasn't worth losing her job to try to arrange a meeting between Langdon and her boss. He might have been willing to pay her a nice

bonus for the help, but jobs like this one were scarce. She'd much rather remain employed than humour a guy who was more interested in the lovely, mysterious owner of *The Ad Campaign* than he was the business itself.

* * *

Gabrielle heard the doors to the elevator swish shut minutes later, and she breathed an inaudible sigh of relief. She was tired down to her bones. The night had seemed endless. But they all seemed that way now, she reminded herself with bitter irony. Tears rose within her, created an ache that was never too far from the surface of her mind. Searing pain blossomed, spread quickly to encompass her entire body as she allowed his face to fill her inner vision.

"Damn you!" she whispered as the glittering lights of the Capital became a white haze that mutated into a rose-coloured blur of watery dots. "DAMN YOU!!!" It was shriek of anguish that echoed in the silence of the empty office complex.

The motion slow, eerily so, Gabrielle slid down the wall and for a long time, the only truth she knew was the horror of her loneliness.

* * *

The first rays of the sun blushed the skyline when Gabrielle rose and locked her offices. She walked to the private elevator and inserted her pass key. LaCroix's money had afforded her any and all luxuries she desired, her apartment was the penthouse of this building. He'd given her access to everything she would need. For a long time, she hadn't touched his wealth. Then, it seemed simple logic to use it to rebuild the life he'd taken from her.

The doors slid silently open and she stepped into the darkened apartment. The rooms were cool and still, a welcome retreat. There was no sign of her previous taste for antiques and heavy wood in evidence within the luxurious suite. Polished brass gleamed, and flawless glass reflected the tiny slivers of light that filtered through the floor length blinds that concealed the balcony doors. A piano dominated one corner of the living room, and on the opposite side was a bar. She smiled as she examined the array of untouched liquor that was on display there. No one ever questioned her preference for dark, rich ruby wines. Not as long as any other beverage they could desire was within easy reach. Of course, there weren't many ever granted access to this place.

She slipped off her shoes and smiled unconsciously when her feet sank into the comfort of thick, plush carpeting. She tossed the key on the bar and went directly to the kitchen. Minutes later she returned to the living room, wine glass filled to the brim with crimson blood.

As unexpectedly as it had happened earlier in the night, Gabrielle felt another tremor of fear wake inside her. She stood motionless in the centre of the room for several seconds.

"You're being ridiculous," she insisted in a shaky tone.

It didn't help.

She glanced at the glass that was teetering in her numb fingers. Impulsively, she drank the contents of the wineglass and set it on the bartop. Gabrielle focused her thoughts, reached

outward with the strong psychic probe that her vampiric senses had enhanced so vividly. The rooms offered nothing, it was as if they had known no presence other than her own. There **should** have been something, her mind insisted. Karla had been in the apartment that evening. Some trace of her aura should have lingered. Unless . . .

Unable to finish the thought, Gabrielle shook off the sense of panic and covered her eyes with the heels of her hands. The wetness of her earlier tears touched her skin, and she snarled in sudden fury as another wave of helplessness washed over her.

Heat warmed her frozen limbs as the rage settled firmly into her consciousness. She refused to allow another paralysing bout of tears and pain. Wiping her cheeks, she spun on her heel and headed for the bathroom. The shower might relax her.

* * *

The soft rain of warm water cascading over her was a caress of welcome tenderness. Gabrielle sighed silently and closed her eyes as she braced her hands on the wall in front of her and let the waterfall embrace her body. Waist-length copper hair clung to her back and she reluctantly stepped away from the support of the wall and raised her arms to gather the long tresses and push them aside.

Her spine tingled in warning.

The scream that started to rise in her throat lodged there as she was pressed back against the steam-warmed tiles. The steady stream of water blinded her, and terror choked her. As she shook her head and reached out to push away the figure that towered over her, she was lifted off her feet. An intense spasm of shock and awakened lust shook her body as he entered her with a quick, hard thrust. Gabrielle closed her eyes and arched toward him, her legs wrapped tightly around his waist and she shuddered into the passion that swept through her as his body moved rhythmically against her. Her heart felt like it was bursting with happiness, she refused to allow any other emotion to take away the perfection of this moment. The back of her head hit the wall as she exposed her throat, the invitation and surrender unspoken, expected. She clung to him when his fangs sank into yielding flesh.

* * *

LaCroix slowly released her and stepped away.

Gabrielle stared at him, grey eyes dazed, filled with wonder. The shower continued to pour water over them, and she watched in mute fascination as the smear of blood at the corner of his mouth dissolved beneath the watery spray and sent a fading pink rivulet of colour down the pale length of his body. Her hand shook visibly when she reached out to place her open palm against his chest. He didn't fade into air. He was real.

Blue eyes filled her vision, the expression in the sapphire depths one of expectancy and mild amusement. One perfect eyebrow rose, emphasised the wordless anticipation of her reaction.

"LaCroix!"

He caught her, held her pressed firmly to him. His hands tangled in the long wet strands of red hair that streamed over her shoulders in total disarray. He ached for her in a way he hadn't known possible, and the brief taste of her blood, and her love, had only teased his hunger, not sated it. He picked her up and carried her into the dark bedroom.

Gabrielle was still stunned and silent. She stared up at him when he placed her in the centre of the bed and stepped back to look at her. Anger stirred, tweaked at her consciousness. He'd unceremoniously walked back into her life, and reclaimed her like a discarded toy that had suddenly become appealing again.

"I hate you, LaCroix," she eventually whispered, words shaken and weak with futile understanding. Her *hate* had never concerned him in any fashion, his arrogant self-confidence refused to ever consider that it might one day be real.

"I've missed you, pet," he murmured. He watched his voice affect her like a touch, saw the tensing of curving muscles as she repressed the shiver of longing his tone created and nurtured. He sat on the edge of the bed, let his fingers delicately trace the smooth contour of her hip before his hand slipped between her thighs and gently parted them. She shook her head and tried to move away from him. LaCroix's fingers dug into sensitive flesh and held her firmly in place.

"Don't make me hurt you, Gabrielle."

After a heartbeat's pause, she laughed at him. The sound was an echo of rage and pain, and so much bitterness that his eyes narrowed when he looked down at her. He read her anger an instant too late to avoid it.

"Bâtard!"

She sprang forward. As the momentum of her lunge tumbled them off the bed, Gabrielle's fangs tore into LaCroix's neck. The sweet tang of his blood, so achingly familiar, so long denied to her, spurted into her mouth and she swallowed the taste and texture of her lover's essence. His surprise brushed her mind, his pleasure woke other desires. He'd fed before coming into the apartment, she felt the hint of fear that lingered from his victim.

She eased back, slightly, and continued to lick at the trickle of scarlet wine that escaped the raw wounds she'd inflicted. Without interruption, her tongue moved lower, streaked a blood-wet caress across his chest. Her fangs scraped across the points of his nipples and she smiled inwardly at the growl of aroused passion she heard rumble deep in his chest. Long fingers danced over her skin, fastened on her hips as he tried to pull her down on him. Her hands curled around his wrists and yanked, she slammed his arms onto the floor as she leaned over him.

LaCroix watched her, drank in the wild-eyed beauty of her lust-induced madness as she bent to run her tongue over his arousal. His back arched seconds later when she closed her mouth over him and the heat of his own lust grew with each answering thrust of his hips as she continued her erotic torture. Laughter spilled from his lips, the sound low with erotic satisfaction. He'd always loved the way Gabrielle *hated* him.

Gabrielle's heart contracted within her at the soft echo of his amusement, his total arrogance. Anger rose again. She let it flow through her, override the hunger he roused in her. The sharp points of her fangs deliberately tormented him, created tiny shudders of pain. He

snarled in fury an instant later when she suddenly pulled back and crossed the room in a blur of unexpected motion.

LaCroix's enraged growl warned her that she'd miscalculated her chances of escaping him. He caught her too quickly, and flung her onto the bed. She was scrambling off the mattress when the grip on her ankle threatened to tear the trapped limb from her body. He hauled her back to him and the tearing of the bed linen was unnaturally loud as she silently fought him, nails clinging uselessly to the fragile material.

He forced her onto her back with a casual twist of his wrist. Her shriek of agony briefly filled the apartment when his powerful mind amplified the assault he had just begun in earnest. Limp and weak with pain, Gabrielle was unresisting when LaCroix joined her on the bed. His hand caught and knotted in her hair, dragged her head back so that the curving line of her throat was exposed to his ravenous hunger. He pulled her up onto her knees, and as she was forced to stare at the shadowed ceiling above them, her body trembled with undisguised terror.

"Please . . . Lucien . . ."

His laughter made another spasm shake her. Her fingers clutched his forearms, and he smiled as he bent to suck one rigid nipple into his mouth. Her choked gasp of surprised pleasure made his body throb with renewed hunger. He bit soft flesh, careful not to hurt her. She shivered, arched into the sensation, and he felt her own passion betray her. He moved to tease her other breast as his free hand slipped between her thighs and expert fingers slid into hot, slick flesh.

"LaCroix . . . Bien-aimé . . ." Her hips pushed into his touch, demanded that he assuage the need he'd aroused so totally. She knew this teasing possession wouldn't be enough; she needed him, desperately wanted his dominance, his power. A low hiss of anguished hunger escaped her, and she shook her head in denial. "Non, mon amour . . ."

LaCroix's head rose, and glowing golden eyes snared her equally passion-bright stare. He read the want in her mind before she tried to back away from it. He smiled, revealed extended fangs that ached for her blood. He settled back on the mattress, drew her with him so that she sat astride his hips.

Gabrielle bit into her bottom lip as she tried to control the instinctive need to surrender to him. He yanked her closer to him and wet tendrils of long red hair fell like a curtain around them. LaCroix's face, beautiful as no other's could ever be, filled her vision. She closed her eyes, groaned in exquisite rapture as his hands fondled her breasts. Her hips shifted and she lowered herself over him, moaning loudly as their joining became the only tangible thing in her world.

As her body strained against his, Gabrielle fell forward, drew his mouth to her throat. Her body convulsed and she choked back a scream as LaCroix's fangs found their place in her neck. His mind caressed her, soothed her frenzy as she spasmed in ecstasy. Her love poured into his awareness, sweetened the blood that he drew from her in hungry swallows. He wanted to drink until she withered in his arms, until he'd consumed her completely. Gabrielle had become his addiction, as consuming as his need for blood, and his control was being sorely tested.

Weakness threatened as her master continued to feed. The shadows in the room were

getting thicker, and she whimpered softly. His name was a breath of air, and a tiny tremor of fear shivered through her. He finally drew back and she collapsed on him, clinging, barely conscious. Moments later, his wrist touched her lips. She opened her mouth, drank the gift of his blood, and felt his obsessive desire swirling within the life giving wine.

The knowledge came swiftly, unexpectedly, revealed in his chaotic thoughts and the intensity of his lust -- LaCroix loved her. It was what had driven him to push her away -- and now, long months later, it was what had brought him back to her.

* * *

"Why?"

LaCroix heard her exhaustion in the single word, and smiled. He was aching with weariness himself. It was well past noon, and they hadn't yet slept. He kissed her shoulder, pushed closer to her, enjoyed the softness of her back against his chest, her generous curves cushioned to the lean length of his body. He raised her wrist to his lips, and his tongue stroked the last set of wounds he'd inflicted. This time he ignored the tremor of desire that woke inside him.

"LaCroix?"

"Shhh . . ." He closed his eyes, felt the lure of sleep tug at his consciousness.

"I want to know why you've come back," she insisted softly.

"I've come back, my pet," he whispered quietly. "Does it really matter why?"

"Yes."

He heard the tremor in her voice, the fear that no amount of shared pleasure had ever been able to soothe. He knew what she wanted from him, what she'd always wanted from him. But could he give her the answer she needed? Could he allow himself to be that vulnerable, even to her?

"I've come back because I want you with me," he said, and waited as she turned in his arms and stared at him. Crimson tears hovered in the corners of her smoke grey eyes, poised to fall as she tried to deny her despair. "You belong with me, Gabrielle. You belong to me!"

"I have never wished to be without you, LaCroix. I have always accepted you, and your possession."

LaCroix leaned forward, his tongue flicked at the scarlet drops and savoured their taste on his lips. He covered her mouth with a gentle, evocative kiss, pressed her into the pillows as he allowed his heart to give her the gift she had fought so desperately for.

"I love you, Gabrielle," he breathed into her ear as he held her in arms that suddenly threatened to break her with their immense strength. He buried his face in her soft mane of auburn hair and listened in silence as she cried.

* * *

"How long will it take you to shut down this office?" LaCroix enquired quietly as he watched her move through the shadowy apartment. Gabrielle rarely bothered with lights,

something he knew had been natural to her even in her mortal life.

"I don't intend to shut down my office," she replied and turned to face him. "You sent me away, LaCroix. For months I was more dead than I'd ever believed possible. You forced me to rebuild a life without you. I plan to continue that life."

LaCroix laughed at the defiance.

"You really think it's this simple, don't you?" Gabrielle challenged. "You find that you miss me, assuming it was me you truly missed, so you return for a night that is supposed to make up for all the time you've forced me to be alone."

"You had no complaint last night, pet," he murmured softly, his resonant voice warm with amusement.

"I have no complaint now," she smiled coldly. "I also have no intention of leaving Ottawa with you. Go to hell, LaCroix. Go back to wherever it is you've come from. Go to Nicholas. Frankly, I don't give a damn. Just stay out of my life."

"I am your life, Gabrielle," he retorted as he rose and crossed the room to face her. "Everything you have, you have because I have given it. Everything you are is what I wish you to be! Don't doubt that, ma bien-aimé," he whispered.

"And you would have me at your side, knowing I detested you?" she wondered, oddly calm in spite of the deliberateness of her very dangerous provocation of his temper.

"You have never detested me, Gabby," he said. "You love me too much."

She laughed, and as it had the previous night, the sound rippled with bitter betrayal, and unmistakable hatred. When his eyes narrowed, she smiled again.

"You are no longer sure of that, are you, LaCroix?"

"If I believed otherwise, pet, I'd destroy you where you stand." The threat was not idle, and he felt her immediate fear, quickly followed by the shielding of her thoughts.

For several minutes, silence engulfed the apartment. Then, with a heavy sigh, Gabrielle gathered the files she needed and headed for the door.

LaCroix, notably, did nothing to stop her.

* * *

"How did the shoot go?"

Karla dropped theatrically into one of the deep armchairs that were in Gabrielle's office. She kicked off her shoes, propped her feet on the low coffeetable and waited for her boss to look at her. 'Monica' had been distracted for days, irritable and much too tired. The commercial created by *The Ad Campaign* ran into several days of overtime because of miscasting, and Karla was the one chosen to oversee the completion of the project.

"Well, it's finally over, that's a plus!"

"And?"

One delicate eyebrow rose, and the smoke-grey gaze was flinty as Gabrielle waited for an answer that wasn't coming quickly enough.

"All right, all right!" Karla snapped and straightened her aching body. "It came out better than we hoped. The client's in seventh heaven, and the actor they finally chose has been

signed to appear in the next three ads. All in all, quite a coup."

Before Gabrielle could comment, the door to her office swung inward and she sucked in a breath of surprise.

"Wow!"

Karla didn't realise the barely audible exclamation could be clearly heard by the two people who now occupied the room with her. She slipped into her discarded heels and rose to meet the visitor.

"What are you doing here?"

"I thought I'd check on my investment," LaCroix told her.

"Your . . ." Gabrielle allowed the insinuation to take root, then she stepped closer to him. "This is my company, LaCroix, and don't you dare think you will control it."

"And where did you get the money to create this toy, my pet?"

Gabrielle's teeth clenched and she seethed as he strolled further into the room and sat on the top of her desk. The sudden tension in the room was palpable.

Karla was fascinated. She'd never seen anyone rattle her boss. Nor had she ever seen a hint of male presence in the woman's life. Yet, this man was clearly someone who knew her intimately.

"Can I get you a drink, Mr. . . . ?"

LaCroix's brilliant blue eyes flitted over the young woman as if only becoming fully aware of her presence. He shook his head and smiled.

"LaCroix," he supplied. "No, thank you. Gab -- "

"Monica Cross," Gabrielle interrupted shortly.

Karla grew more fascinated. To her great disappointment, Gabrielle chose that moment to dismiss her.

"Tell Jaen I don't want any interruptions until LaCroix is gone," she directed as she held open the door.

When she slammed the heavy panel of oak back into place, Gabrielle turned blazing eyes to LaCroix.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

"Monica Cross?" he repeated with a raised eyebrow. "Monica for your beloved grandmother, and Cross . . ." His hand went to the centre of his chest in an exaggerated gesture of disarming, and patently false humility. "I am distinctly flattered." He grinned at her as she growled and walked to the window.

"Have you come to your senses, pet?"

"I believe I have, which is why I'm staying here."

"I'm willing to give you another week, Gabrielle. Clear up your business and be ready to go with me by then."

"No."

Annoyance flickered across LaCroix's handsome features, then he rose and went to stand at her back. His arms encircled her waist, pulled her firmly against him. When her hands moved to dislodge his grip, he grabbed her wrists and held them so tightly she gasped in pain. Slowly, LaCroix moved to sit in front of her on the wide bench-like seat at the base of her office

window. Her arms were crossed in front of her and his hold was relentless. She was chewing her bottom lip in an attempt to remain silent.

Blue eyes flared to life, mutated into searing golden flames as LaCroix continued to hold her gaze. Her wrists were numb and she could feel the growing tension of his rage as it uncoiled like a deadly viper within him.

"You know better than this, pet," he whispered silkily, the words a breath of caressing air between them.

"You say you love me, LaCroix," she gradually answered in a shaken rush of anguished words. "You have owned me for centuries, in one form or another, why would I believe that possession and domination is now love? The only person you've ever loved is . . . Nicholas." She knew there had once been another, Nick's beloved sister, Fleur, but fear silenced that name.

LaCroix tugged her nearer to him and his long legs opened to allow her to come closer. He took her hands and brought them to his lips, kissing each palm before releasing her. As he slid forward to stand, he picked her up and reversed their positions. Gabrielle sat in front of him, her chest heaving with the effort to subdue both fear and curious desire. Grey eyes were already soft and glittering with unshed crimson tears.

"Leave me alone, LaCroix?"

He smiled and this time his long fingers curled around her ankles. She never wore stockings and he let his hands drift upward over smooth curving legs. She stiffened when his searching touch slid beneath her skirt.

"No, LaCroix. Please don't?"

He ignored her.

"I don't want -- " She lost the objection in a gasp of surprise when he dropped to his knees in front of her. His hands moved again, one slipping into the silk of her panties and tearing the delicate material, while his other grasped her ankle again. He raised the trapped limb to his mouth and sucked persuasively at the inside of her ankle as she tried to squirm away from the touch. He tossed aside the torn black silk and her hands slammed down on his shoulders as he leaned into her. The resistance was futile, as she knew it would be. Her head fell back and she trembled violently as LaCroix's tongue woke the intense, all consuming passion she had never known with anyone but him.

He held her ankles against the ledge of the window, trapped her and kept her immobile as he opened her to his hungry exploration. She shuddered and moaned softly, the sound muffled as she bit her lip to prevent the scream he heard within his mind as their thoughts linked and her love flooded into his body. Her hips pressed closer and he slowed the erotic probe of his tongue to an agonising stroke that had her shaking uncontrollably in seconds.

He drew away against her groan of protest and again drew her ankle to his lips. He bit into the vein that pulsed there, sucked seductively as he watched her hand move between her thighs. She finished what he'd started and through her blood and their bond he swallowed the star-burst of her pleasure as she closed her eyes and scarlet tears slid down her cheeks.

* * *

Karla was nearing the door when she heard the choked moan that warned her away. She couldn't tell if it was pain or pleasure, and wasn't anxious to open the door to discover for herself which emotion provoked the sound. Jaen glanced up from her desk and Karla wondered if the other woman was close enough to have heard. When Jaen's dark eyes reflected nothing more than curiosity, Karla smiled half-heartedly and shrugged.

"It's not important," she said. "I'll wait until she's alone."

Before she could be questioned, Karla scurried back to her office. She sat at her desk and pondered the mystery man's presence in Monica's office. Of course, she corrected silently, Monica wasn't really her name, was it? The stranger had gotten as far as Gab -- what could that mean?

"Gab . . . Gab . . ." she mused out loud. "Gabby? Gabriel, Gabrielle!" Karla straightened up in her chair. It made sense all of a sudden. Jared Langdon, C.E.O. of Sheraton Enterprises. He'd inherited the company from its owner, Gabrielle Sinclaire. Sinclaire was a well-known name in the advertising industry. Was Monica Cross really Gabrielle Sinclaire? It could explain why Langdon was so interested in a small, relatively obscure company that was only a handful of months old.

So, who was the mystery man in the office with Monica Cross? LaCroix . . . That was the name he'd used to introduce himself. French . . . for the Cross . . . Karla was jazzed now, on a roll in her own mind. She went to the bookcase that dominated her office and pulled down a volume of old press clips and assorted like material. She'd spent years collecting all she could about the ad industry, and the people who made it work. She knew there was likely to be an entry for Gabrielle Sinclaire, and her company.

She brought the binder to her desk and began her search. It didn't take her long to find what she wanted. The picture on the press release was the woman she knew as Monica Cross, and the connection was easily found. Monica Sheraton was the founder of the ad agency, Gabrielle's grandmother.

"And the guy in the office with her is probably the guy she took off with," Karla whispered to the air. Her romantic mind ran with the thought. She'd always assumed that her boss was running from something, and she had created an entire background for the woman. It involved an abusive husband, a lover's quarrel, and a flight into the night. Then a rebuilt life, with a new name and a new love. The only thing Monica lacked was the new love.

But, the guy in the other room would be impossible to forget anyway, she decided. If Karla had been his lover, she wouldn't be anxious to settle for someone else. He wasn't the most attractive man she'd ever met, but he sure as hell made you think he was when he turned those piercing blue eyes on you. He was too thin, his hair was too short, and he was way too arrogant to be appealing. But, he was also downright gorgeous in spite of that.

She was startled out of her musings by the buzz of the intercom. She waited a second for her heartbeat to even out, then grabbed the phone.

* * *

"You wanted to see me, Ms. Cross?"

Karla shut the door quietly behind her and took a surreptitious look at the man who stood near the window and peered out into the night. He was casual and relaxed, completely at home in the office. Karla's eyes darted to her boss, who was a striking contrast to her visitor. Tension emanated from the redhead, and Karla wondered if the cries she'd heard had been the result of pain, and not pleasure. She suspected the fair-haired man at the window could probably inflict both with equal skill. The thought seemed to draw his attention and LaCroix eerily turned to glance at her. She shivered when she read the indolent satisfaction in his eyes. He had the unmistakable look of a man who'd just gotten what he wanted, in this case that no doubt meant her boss.

"I want you to arrange a meeting with Colin Sterling, for tomorrow evening."

"You want to see your lawyer?" Karla realised as she spoke that she was revealing emotions she had no right to express. She felt ice along her spine and knew LaCroix was now staring at her.

"Just do as I ask, Karla. Please?" Gabrielle said quietly. When she would have added something to the request a knock at the door preempted it. She called out a soft, "come in", and waited for Jaen to step into the room.

"Justin Lord is in the Conference Room, Ms. Cross, he wants to see you immediately."

"Tell him I'll be right in, and see if there's anything he needs, Jaen." She turned her attention to her assistant as the door shut again. "Get the Lord file and join me."

When they were alone, Gabrielle turned to look at LaCroix.

"Will you leave me to do what needs to be done here?"

"And what might that be, pet?"

She glowered at him and left without another word.

* * *

LaCroix paced the office for several minutes. He smiled deeply at the power he'd exercised over his lover tonight, she really couldn't keep him blocked from her mind now. He'd finally broken her shielding. He owned Gabrielle as he never had before.

The insistent ring of the telephone interrupted his pleasant mood, and he picked up the receiver when he recalled the secretary was no longer at her desk. His face darkened when he recognised the voice on the other end of the line.

"Langdon, what an unpleasant surprise."

Silence arced across the miles as Jared hesitated.

"What is it you want, Langdon?" LaCroix asked, his tone bored and veiled with anger.

"Monica Cross," Jared answered thoughtfully. "Or, should I ask for Gabrielle? I thought it had to be her. The Lord campaign was too much like her work."

"I warned you, Langdon. Gabrielle Sinclair is dead to you. She is mine. Forget it again and I will make you regret your lapse."

"Tell her I'm on my way to Ottawa. I'll see her tomorrow."

LaCroix laughed darkly. "Reconsider, Langdon," he advised coldly. "If you don't, Gabrielle will suffer, I promise you."

"You bastard! Hurt her and I'll destroy you."

"You may have this company, Langdon. I'll have the papers drawn up by morning. But, you cannot have the owner -- that is one piece of property that I refuse to give up. She'll be gone by the time you reach here, Langdon. You have my word on it."

LaCroix dropped the receiver back into place and turned to see Gabrielle glaring at him from the doorway.

"You had no right, LaCroix!" she hissed in fury. Her eyes glittered dangerously, golden fire sputtered behind the smoke in their depths.

"I promised you I would let him live, Gabrielle," LaCroix said smoothly. He crossed the distance in a heartbeat's space of time and loomed over her. "I own you, pet. And I will not have anyone else think otherwise."

"He didn't even know who owned . . . who ran this damn company!" she retorted. "He had no idea!"

"You're a fool, Gabrielle, if you believe that."

"Damn you, LaCroix!!" she snarled. "Why don't you just go? Leave me alone!" Her last words were almost a shriek of rage and frustration.

"Who do you want your company given to?"

"Go to hell, LaCroix."

"I'll arrange the sale," he commented blandly and bent to kiss her. She tried to turn away from the caress and he caught her hair in a firm grasp as he covered her mouth with his. She went rigid in his arms and he released her with a laugh.

* * *

It took LaCroix less than a week to find her. He sold *The Ad Campaign* as he'd told her he would. Gabrielle had never returned to the apartment above the agency. She tried to run from him. When he found her several days later, he knew he'd truly won. What his rage and will wasn't able to achieve, his love did. He offered her his heart, and she could no more deny him than she could walk in sunlight and live.

* * *

TORONTO -- Six months later

"When was the last time you saw him, Janette?"

The Mistress of the Raven looked up from the pile of paperwork that was spread out before her on the desk. She didn't actually mind the interruption of this particular chore, but she wasn't pleased by the subject matter of the conversation. Sighing heavily, Janette dropped her pen and leaned back in her chair.

"Nickola, we have been over this a dozen times in the past few weeks. It's getting

tiresome."

"You know what he's like, Janette. When he's not around he's almost as dangerous as when he does show up."

She laughed softly, her amusement genuine. Moreso when Nick glared at her.

"LaCroix is finally allowing you the freedom you wanted so desperately, mon chér," she noted. Blue eyes grew serious and she straightened in her seat. "Nickola, don't provoke an attack that is unnecessary. LaCroix may be quiet, but that doesn't mean he's forgotten any of it."

"That's what worries me," Knight mused as he paced the small office. "Every time he has shown up over the past few months, he's been almost helpful."

"Perhaps he's taken on a new perspective?" Janette teased.

"Where did he go, months ago?"

"Why don't you ask him yourself?" she returned, bored with the redundancy of the exchange. "I have work to do, Nickola. Let me do it."

"You hate paperwork more than I do," he stated absently. The silence lengthened, then he sighed quietly. "I have to go."

He had the door open and was about to step into the strobe-lit nightclub when Janette's voice halted his exit.

"He went to get Gabrielle."

"Colby?"

"Sinclair, Nickola," Janette admonished with a grin. "She's not the same woman now, or so she claims."

"She's powerful, Janette," he whispered. "And too devoted to LaCroix."

"She is what keeps him occupied, Nick," the beautiful vampire replied seriously. "She loves him. And, I think LaCroix has learned to love her."

Nick's disbelief was eloquently written in his features as he shook his head and turned. Moments later Janette was alone in the stillness of her office.

* * *

"Maybe Janette's right, Nick," Natalie reasoned in her most sensible tone. "Why don't you just count your blessings and let it go at that?"

"Because the one thing LaCroix taught me too well was to never let my guard down. He's out there, Nat. And **something** isn't right. I can feel it!"

Natalie turned to put a comforting hand on his shoulder and aborted the action when the lab doors swung inward. Schanke's expression was grim.

"What?"

"We just got a call, possible kidnapping." He didn't wait for a comment, simply turned around and headed back through the doors.

"We'll talk later, Nick," Natalie gently offered with a smile.

Nodding, Knight followed his partner.

* * *

"Are you sure this is the place?" Nick stared in disbelief at the ostentatious house, his heartbeat erratic, shaken.

Schanke checked the address he'd scrawled in his notebook. When he started to offer a terse reply to the query, he was silenced by the sincere worry in his partner's expression.

"What's wrong, Nick? Do you know who lives here?"

Knight shook off the uneasiness and grinned half-heartedly in an attempt to conceal his uncertainty. He indicated the house with a nod and started toward the huge front door. His heart sank when their summons was answered.

He staggered back a few paces as the pungent odour of garlic drifted from the exit. Suppressing a choked cough, and the urge to turn and put several feet between him and the door, he forced down the queasiness in his stomach and faced the person waiting for his attention. The presence there did nothing to reassure him.

Framed in the doorway was a man he hadn't seen in several centuries. Stavros smiled coolly, polite curiosity in his jet coloured eyes.

"Metro Police," Schanke spoke up as he flashed his badge. "We had a report of someone being taken from this house."

"You're mistaken, Officer . . . ?"

"Detective Schanke," he supplied. "And this is my partner, Nick Knight. Are you tellin' us that everything's okay here?" He sounded dubious, and shuddered nervously a second later when the stranger's cold dark gaze shifted from Knight to lock with his eyes.

"I assure you, Detective Schanke, no one has been taken from this house against their will. Whoever called you is mistaken." There was an ominous calm in the even voice, and the black eyes glittered dangerously, predatory doom in their shadowed depths.

Nick saw the warning, and he mumbled a quick, "Thank you!", as he herded Schanke away from the house and back to the Caddy.

"What the hell is going on, Knight?" Schanke snapped once they were inside Nick's car. "The neighbours say they heard someone screaming bloody murder as they were pushed into a car, and you don't even want to talk to the owner of the house? Assuming that creep was the owner," he added as they sped down the curving driveway.

"He wasn't," Nick muttered.

"How do you know that?"

"I know, Schank," Knight retorted, too harshly. His stomach was still twitching with nausea, and he rolled down the window to let in more fresh air. The scent of garlic clung to him, and he would have given anything to fly until the sickening stench left him. Schanke laughed but didn't comment. Nick returned the humour and softened his tone when he continued. "Just trust me on this one, Schanke. I'll contact the owner and see what's going on. In the meantime, why don't you talk to the neighbours?"

"He said there was nothing wrong," Schanke pointed back in the general direction of the house that was fading in the distance.

"Maybe there isn't?" Nick suggested with a weak smile. "Why don't we find out?"

"Yeah," Schanke sighed in mild disgust.

* * *

"Get out, Nicholas!" The words were grated out from between tightly clenched teeth, and barely audible.

Knight stopped just inside the shadowed control room at CERK Radio, startled by the rage that lit LaCroix's inhuman eyes. The master vampire paced in the confined space, every movement sleek, graceful -- dangerously restrained.

"What's going on, LaCroix? Maybe I can help?" He surprised himself with the offer, and the uneasiness he'd felt earlier in the evening returned to chill him to the bone.

LaCroix's laughter was horrible, tainted with a madness Nick hadn't sensed in his master for a long time. That absolute darkness was echoed in the piercing blue eyes that bored into him seconds later.

"Go away, Nicholas!" he hissed. "I have no use for you. Nor do I particularly care if you wish to help or not."

When Knight refused to move, the ancient vampire's composure slipped, and his snarl quickly mutated into an enraged growl of fury. Nick couldn't tell which of them LaCroix wanted to destroy at that moment. The platinum haired vampire took a step toward Nick, visibly reconsidered the action he'd been about to make, then spun on his heel and left the studio room.

* * *

The walls were damp with mildew, and the scent of mould and decay was suffocating. But the absolute darkness was not something she feared as she crouched in a corner and stared into nothingness. Her clothes were filthy, and her skin crawled with invisible parasites. She'd screamed her throat raw days ago, now her voice was silenced.

Sounds from somewhere far above teased at her mind, tortured her with the knowledge that she was being held in this prison, and deliberately ignored. They never told her why they'd taken her. But they **did** know how to hold her in place. They'd denied her blood for several days, kept her in shackles that were anchored securely within the stone walls. The tiny crosses that were engraved deep into the metal cuffs burned and scarred her wrists, kept the pain a dull and constant ache. All of the things that would weaken her had been present. A large, intricately detailed silver crucifix adorned the cage door, garlic gas had kept her choked and weak for the first while. They brandished burning ash stakes when they came to her. All of the myths that were not really myths had been turned against her. Yet, none had spoken. She knew nothing of their reasons for tormenting her.

Tears rose and she stifled the sob that wanted to spurt from her. She bit into her bottom lip until the faint metallic taste of blood turned bitter in her mouth. Unconsciously, she began to twist the heavy silver ring that adorned her left hand. It was a perfect match to the ancient ring she had returned to her lover months earlier, he'd had it made for her. She wore it as a

mortal woman would wear her wedding ring, it told all who saw it that she belonged to LaCroix. Her hands closed into fists and she felt the weight of despair crush her. She leaned forward, head on crossed arms as she pulled her knees to her chest and began to rock.

"LaCroix! Help me!!"

It was a whisper of sound in the dank cell.

In her mind, it was a shrieking howl of anguish that went spinning into the night. She cried softly, almost soundlessly, and tried to ignore the gnawing hunger that was slowly driving her crazy. Hunger, and the deeper agony of again being separated from her beloved master.

* * *

The echo was chilling, and inside the quiet sanctuary of the CERK radio station, 'The Night Crawler' shuddered in pain. He finished the sentence that had hung suspended on the airwaves, mindless of what words he spoke. It didn't matter, all his mind could drag in was the ragged horror of her screams. It had been almost a week since her disappearance, and he hurt as he hadn't in nearly eight centuries. Yet, it was different. Ultimately, he had chosen his pain the first time. Now, someone else had decided to take his happiness from him. LaCroix relinquished nothing until he was ready, and he was far from ready to deny Gabrielle's place in his life.

Gabrielle's absence was a void that he hadn't expected to know again. He'd selected her, accepted his need to have her at his side. Then someone had dared to take her. He heard every cry she sent into the darkness, every plea she made to him. But he could not find her. No amount of searching had given him her location. Stavros was having no more luck than he was, and that worried the ancient vampire almost as much as the change in her screams. She was being deliberately starved, driven to the brink of sanity before they would feed her.

Gabrielle would die, or worse, if he didn't find her soon. Words again began to flow outward from the subdued studio, and LaCroix's eyes closed as he absorbed her fear, and transformed it within his mind and heart.

"Ma bien-aimé," he purred into the microphone. "I know you're out there, my pet. Waiting . . . crying for vengeance . . . I will avenge you, love." He leaned closer to the control panel, elbows rested on the edge of the board.

He smiled.

Death's smile.

Warming to his chosen subject, LaCroix's voice caressed the airwaves, paused between each eerily whispering statement.

"Let's talk about retribution, boys and girls. Who decides what the price for pain truly is? When someone dares to take from you the most important part of your immortal soul, doesn't that demand reprisal? Doesn't that piss you off? Doesn't it make you want to become judge, jury and executioner? Isn't that your right?"

While he calmly incited and unsettled his audience, his mind reached for Gabrielle's, tried to comfort her.

* * *

The voice on the radio lulled, insidious malevolence emanated from the deceptively mild tones. Schanke reached out to shut off the sound, his action prompted by the uncomfortable chill that presently resided near the back of his neck.

"No! Leave it on."

The urgency in Nick's voice shocked him back against the seat. The cold dread became a tight knot in his stomach.

"That guy gives me the creeps, Knight."

Nick wasn't listening, at least not to his partner's voice. LaCroix's silken vocal touch brushed at his memory, woke a fear that he hadn't felt for almost two hundred years . . .

Gabrielle Colby laughed quietly as she stood at the foot of the bed and watched the young girl writhe in LaCroix's grasp. The others had fought harder against him, but this was the death that she'd hungered for. She had promised him over and over that he would be avenged for the girl's folly.

Melissa Tarrant had set in motion a chain of events that would be her downfall; she'd almost destroyed LaCroix and his lover. The hunters who'd chased the couple had very nearly succeeded in their quest to end the existence of the vampires.

Nicholas had tried to reason with Gabrielle, and she'd threatened him when he attempted to stop her vengeance. Janette forced him to accept Gabrielle's right to defend LaCroix in any manner she deemed correct.

Just as LaCroix had dismissed Nicholas's objections weeks later when the master vampire exacted his revenge upon the man who'd violated Gabrielle, and forced him to endure the assault on his mistress.

Blood had flowed like wine in the month that followed the lovers' confrontation with the hunters of Boston. When none remained living, they were appeased . . .

"Knight! Earth to Nick!" Schanke let go of the steering wheel with a snort of disgust. "Listen, Nick, if you're really feeling suicidal tonight, do you think you could let me out here?"

"Sorry, Schank," Knight mumbled as he concentrated on the road. LaCroix's eerie, seductive voice had faded into unsettling, moody music, but the haunting undercurrent of pain and carefully regulated rage continued to echo in his ears.

* * *

"LaCroix!" Janette's voice was a hiss of annoyance and reluctant concern as she hovered

near the master vampire. He'd arrived near dawn, and it was now the middle of the day. He hadn't spoken, despite her instinctive understanding of his need for company. She placed a gentle hand on his shoulder, and started slightly when his fingers came to rest over hers.

"You must do something!" she whispered. "This is madness, LaCroix." Without meaning to, she'd chosen words that lit rage in his eyes, and quickly backed up a step.

"Madness, Janette?" he repeated, his rigidly imposed control laced the words with steel. "You don't know what madness is! You haven't heard it until you've listened to her cries for days. Do you think I haven't tried to find her?" he charged furiously. Gold flickered beneath the cool blue ocean of his eyes, and he felt the tug of blood-rage threaten his composure further.

Janette let him pace for a few minutes, a shiver working its way up her spine as she considered, briefly, what he would do once he discovered who'd been foolish enough to take Gabrielle prisoner. She refused to contemplate the possibility that LaCroix would not find both his mistress and those who held her. If Gabrielle did not survive . . . She cut the thought short before it could truly take root in her mind. Some things did not bear thinking about.

"She's interfered in matters that she had no right to pursue, LaCroix," Janette said carefully. "Could the Enforcers have her?"

"Interfered?" he smiled. "Yes, I suppose saving my life could be considered interference. They don't have her," he concluded firmly. "They wouldn't dare."

"LaCroix."

He ignored the admonishment.

"They don't have her, Janette."

The raven haired vampire acquiesced with a nod and a weary sigh. "What do you want from me, LaCroix?"

He glanced over his shoulder at her, and his smile was softer than she had seen it for many decades.

"Company, ma petite, nothing more."

Janette crossed the space that separated them, and she leaned against his back, her arms about his waist. "I am sorry, LaCroix."

He closed his eyes and regretted the action instantly when another of the horrifying shrieks of anguish shuddered through him. He hissed softly, felt Janette's arms tighten around him, and absorbed the shock of agony in helpless rage. It was several moments before the echo faded, and only the dull ache of her absence remained within him.

"You love her, don't you?"

He heard the quiet enquiry as if from a vast distance. His own voice sounded vague and separate from him when he answered with direct, unaccustomed honesty. "Yes."

* * *

Nick strolled into the station and sprinted up the stairs. He had hardly slept, and the dull throb behind his eyes was a startling reminder that tension could still affect him. Schanke wasn't due in for at least a half hour, so he figured he'd catch up on some paperwork. He turned the corner and stopped short when he spotted the man seated at his desk. For a minute

he hesitated, then he forced his feet to move.

"What are you doing here?"

"I want your help."

The lack of taunting was more convincing than the simple truth, and Nick perched on the edge of his desk. LaCroix's piercing sapphire gaze locked with his, and the master vampire's mouth curved into a smile that was devoid of pleasantness or warmth of any kind.

"You told me you didn't want anything from me," Nick pointedly reminded him.

"I've changed my mind," LaCroix tossed back as he stood up. The tone was light, masqued the anger and fear that had prompted him to seek Nicholas.

"Maybe I have too," Knight replied.

"Nicholas."

The single word was a warning, and the younger man stiffened reflexively. He nodded toward an empty Interrogation Room, and followed LaCroix. Once inside, he waited as the ancient vampire strode to the window and stared outward. The tension that caused Nick's headache was painfully evident in LaCroix's stance.

"What's happening, LaCroix?"

"Gabrielle's disappeared."

Stunned, Nick walked over to stand next to his former mentor.

"When?"

"The night you were called to the estate," LaCroix supplied. "Stavros told me you had been there."

"Who's taken her?"

"I don't know." LaCroix turned to face the knight, his expression chilly. "But I intend to find out. I will have her back, Nicholas," he promised softly.

"Why do you want me to do?"

"Use whatever resources this mortal career of yours may offer," LaCroix snapped.

"I doubt there's much --"

LaCroix's eyes narrowed dangerously and he leaned closer to Nick, their faces mere inches apart. His voice was a rasp of contained fury.

"I have rarely asked you for anything, Nicholas. You have even more rarely done as I requested. This time, I will not accept excuses for your weaknesses. You will help me, Nicholas. Or, I promise you, this time I will take from you what's been taken from me. That is the price your failure will exact. Do we understand each other?"

Nick's expression grew as dark as his master's.

"Don't threaten me, LaCroix," he warned.

"It wasn't a threat, Nicholas."

The lack of visible emotion in LaCroix's gaze was unnerving. Knight stepped back and moved to sit on the table that occupied the centre of the room.

"Why would anyone want her?"

"I assume because she's mine," LaCroix countered blandly.

"What does Stavros think?"

"That I should leave it alone."

"But you won't?"

LaCroix didn't bother with an answer he knew wasn't expected anyway.

"Why, LaCroix?"

LaCroix's eyebrow rose, the enquiry silent.

"If they'd taken her a year ago, would you have cared? You left her to die two centuries ago, watched her burn."

"She's not the same woman, Nicholas," the older vampire said quietly. "Gabrielle Colby was terrified and inexperienced, far too arrogant in her immortality."

"She was your creation, LaCroix. That's where her arrogance was born -- in you!"

Again, there was no visible reaction to the charged words. LaCroix leaned against the windowframe and crossed his arms as he stared at the former knight.

"I want her back, Nicholas. Don't concern yourself with why, just do whatever you must to facilitate that end."

A knock at the door prevented further discussion. Schanke peered into the room, then joined them.

"So this is where you've been hiding. The Captain wants us Knight," he added after a cursory glance at LaCroix. When no introduction was forthcoming, he shrugged and reached for the door. He let out a low hiss of startlement when LaCroix's fingers closed over the knob. He hadn't seen the man move.

"You know what I want, Nicholas," LaCroix whispered quietly. "Remember, it is in your best interests to succeed this time."

Knight glared at the door as it closed behind the departing vampire.

"What the hell was that all about?"

"Nothing," Nick grumbled. "It's personal, Schanke," he added when he saw the objection forming in his partner's eyes. Before Schanke could argue further, he left the room and headed for Cohen's office.

* * *

Evann Bolivar stared at the video monitor that sat on one corner of his desk. The cell was dimly lit, but his eyes discerned every inch of the small space as if it were lit by floodlights. She was weak and terrified, but her pain affected him in no way. He smiled. LaCroix's taste had surprised him. This was a lovely and intelligent woman, passionate and deeply in love with her master. None of LaCroix's spawn had ever before remained totally loyal to the ancient, but this one refused to abandon him under any circumstances.

"How long do you intend to keep her here?"

The slender, wraith-like figure rose gracefully from his chair and strolled to the bar at one side of his study.

"As long as it takes to unnerve him." He picked up a heavy crystal champagne flute and set it carefully on the gleaming surface of the bar. A moment later he filled it with the thick blood drenched ruby wine that sustained his existence. Smiling, he turned back to his friend and partner.

"LaCroix's a danger to all our kind now," Evann said softly. "He should have died last year. If his bitch hadn't been permitted to shield and protect him, it would have been over."

"I doubt Nick would see it that way. No one exactly 'let' her keep LaCroix's presence a secret. She did it on her own," Marc Dennison reminded quietly. Evann shrugged and returned to his desk, his eyes drawn back to the screen of the monitor.

Marc watched, allowed his look to appraise his friend. Evann was more powerful than any of the vampire community suspected. He was an accident, made by Janette nearly a century ago. It wasn't difficult to imagine what had drawn the lovely woman to Evann. He was tall, thin, regal in bearing -- much like LaCroix in that respect. It was where the similarities ended. Evann's eyes were odd coloured, one brown, one icy blue. His hair changed shades as often as his mood dictated. He was shrewd, thoughtful, cold, and had limitless patience. That control was equally matched by his thirst for power. LaCroix's nature was passionate, whimsical, almost capricious. The master vampire was a creature of legend and myth, even among their kind. LaCroix's arrogance and wisdom had come with several thousand years of life. He was secure and completely at ease with his power. He had a right to be, Marc admitted to himself. He hadn't been able to persuade his friend of that particular truth, despite many nights of long discussion.

Evann had never allowed passion or obsession to cloud his vision. He claimed that was the one weakness LaCroix possessed, and he fully intended to exploit the vulnerability. Evann had plans to reorder their society, into something that was safe and comfortable for all vampires. At least that was the ideal he preached to the increasing number of disciples who flocked to his cause. Marc was never fully convinced, but he had loved the other man for much too long to deny Evann any support he required.

"When do you plan to confront him?"

Evann smiled, no warmth in the expression.

"When I'm ready. When he's ready to give me what I want to get this woman back."

"He might not want her," Marc pointed out logically. "LaCroix's never been overly attached to anyone, expect Nick. And no one has ever been able to manipulate him, Evann," he added, voice heavy with meaning and unspoken warning.

"She can."

"Gabrielle won't do anything to place him in danger. She'll die first. If you know anything about her, Evann, you know that. Besides, she's powerful in her own right. How long do you think it will be before she understands what's going on?"

"She's learning to hate him, Marc," Evann whispered softly as he watched the beautiful redhead. "His slut doesn't understand why he allows her to suffer this way."

"You can't know that, Evann." Marc's voice was impatient, and he felt the agitation flood into his body and demand motion. He rose and paced the room, drawn repeatedly to the monitor screen that held such fascination for his friend.

"You can't know her thoughts," he whispered. "None of us have that kind of power, Evann. Only LaCroix."

* * *

Gabrielle felt their eyes on her. She smiled, the expression hidden by the coppery curtain of her hair. Every part of her ached with an intensity that threatened to drive her into fits of keening screams. She pushed away the agony with a control that she'd begun to believe broken. Her mind cleared, reached outward.

'LaCroix?'

Instead of the terror drenched shrieks of the past week, she forced her thought to be cool and direct. Hunger gnawed at her gut, and she crossed her arms tighter to her body. They hadn't allowed her nourishment for the past two days. It was creating a haziness in her mind that distorted her thoughts, her ability to hold onto the thread of sanity that enabled her to search for some clue to what was happening to her.

Tears welled behind closed lids and she gritted her teeth as a sob of despair mushroomed inside her.

"No!"

The rough denial was spoken aloud and it startled her. She lifted her head and stared with unerring certainty toward the camera that she knew was concealed in one dark corner of the cell.

"He will destroy you," she said, voice quiet, certain.

* * *

"She's known all along that we're watching her."

Evann laughed, the sound rich with sincere amusement.

"Of course she has, Marc. I would have been extremely disappointed if she hadn't spotted the camera at once."

"Then what makes you think LaCroix doesn't know where she is?" he demanded.

"Not all his people are as loyal as he would believe," Evann answered with an enigmatic smile.

"He . . . will . . . destroy . . . you . . ."

The soft murmur came from the woman locked in the cell several floors beneath them. Marc shuddered and turned away, suddenly sick. Evann laughed again. His humour was shaken momentarily when he realised that the voice had been inside his head, and the image of LaCroix's lover, expression serene and smiling, reached out from the screen and kissed his throat with ice.

* * *

LaCroix stirred in his restless slumber, and he reached toward the soft voice that called to him. His body responded to the breathless whisper and he shuddered, searched the space beside him for the curvaceous body that should have shared his bed. His fingertips tingled against the silk sheet and he smiled, his mind filled with her image.

Gabrielle . . .

LaCroix?

Confusion clouded his thoughts, bypassed the very pleasant heat of his awakening lust. He felt the unwanted presence of fear and rage, and deliberately turned away from the awareness. He called to her again, sent the demand into her consciousness. His silent laughter was erotic, satisfied, when his lover answered.

The ancient vampire settled more comfortably into his sleep, embraced by the adoring dream of his missing consort. For moments that were precious and stolen, he held Gabrielle and her love created magick against his skin and within his heart.

A loud, rough knock on the thick oak door penetrated the fog of euphoric pleasure that blanketed the sleeping vampire. The dream ended abruptly, snapped like a dried twig beneath a careless foot. LaCroix's eyes glowed his fury and frustration when he rose from the bed and wrenched open the door to the master bedroom.

"Nicholas?" His anger dissolved into surprise and suspicion when he faced the golden haired knight.

"I've found something," Nick told him, tone terse and uneasy. "I'll wait downstairs for you," he added with a glance at LaCroix's nakedness.

The other man smiled, a flicker of amusement that fleetingly lit features that were perpetually scowling in recent days. He closed the door without comment.

* * *

"What does the name Evann Bolivar mean to you?"

LaCroix frowned, ran the name through the vast file of his memory. He shook his head, genuinely puzzled.

"It means nothing, Nicholas."

"Then you'd better get acquainted with it, and quickly," Nick advised. Knight shook his head when LaCroix offered him a glass of the crimson blood he'd retrieved from the bar. "He's been quietly building a base of power, and a great number of our kind believe he's going to offer them a better way of life."

LaCroix resisted the urge to laugh. Under other circumstances the revelation would have been patently absurd. The ache in his heart wouldn't allow that casual, dismissive attitude to surface. If this man, Evann, had taken Gabrielle from him . . .

"LaCroix?"

The master vampire's eyebrow rose at the irritation in Nick's voice. Icy blue eyes captured Knight's uneasy gaze.

"Where is he?"

"We're still trying to locate him," Nick answered. He hesitated, uncertainty keeping him silent. He knew the pause wouldn't go unnoted by his former mentor.

"What aren't you telling me, Nicholas?" LaCroix enquired, his tone coloured with faint exasperation.

Again, there was an uncharacteristic reluctance.

"Nicholas!"

"It's nothing solid, LaCroix," he confessed. "Just rumour."

"And?" LaCroix managed not to snarl, but just barely.

"He's one of Janette's." Nick felt intensely disloyal as he offered LaCroix a weapon to use against the lovely woman, but it was not something he had much choice in. LaCroix's rage would destroy more than one life if he felt betrayed, and Nick knew from painful past experience what a lethal thing the ancient vampire's anger could be.

LaCroix accepted the unexpected information without visible response. He considered the possible significance of Janette's involvement, and dismissed it as chance. He smiled at Nick.

"I assure you, Nicholas. Janette is quite safe. As are your mortal friends."

"What do you intend to do, LaCroix?"

"Find her."

Nick waited. He'd seen Janette before coming to the estate, and she was as mystified by the name as LaCroix had been. The lovely vampire had also warned Nick of the mood he'd find their master in.

"When did she become so important to you?" It was something he'd wondered about, but hadn't dared to voice since his first aborted attempt at the police station.

"She's always been important to me, Nicholas," LaCroix chided.

"Not like this, LaCroix," the former knight whispered. "You haven't been like this since . . ."

LaCroix's eyebrow rose and he smiled. "Since Fleur, Nicholas. Isn't that what you wanted to say?"

Nick turned away, shaken, disturbed by the reminder of his sister -- and LaCroix's love for her.

"I won't lose Gabrielle, Nicholas. She's all I have left."

Nick looked back at him, searched the surprisingly candid blue eyes, and found no deception for the second time in the centuries he'd known LaCroix.

"You love her."

It wasn't a question, and LaCroix didn't answer the words. He drained the glass he'd been holding and set it on the bar as he headed toward the door.

"Where are you going, LaCroix?" Nick took several steps after the master vampire, intent on following him.

"To get some answers, Nicholas." LaCroix glanced back, and laughed quietly. "If I need you, I'll let you know."

Knight halted abruptly. He knew the tone, and the chill that sent an icy touch of dread the length of his spine. If he tried to interfere, LaCroix would simply include him in whatever hell he planned to invoke this night.

* * *

Gabrielle stirred in her cell, moaned softly as she shifted and rolled onto her back. If it was possible, the ache that had been within her for so many days now encompassed her body in greater throes of dull agony. It wasn't hunger that woke her from the deeper sleep she had

induced, it was memory. And the sweetness of her heart's desire was the source of her anguish . . .

Blue eyes filled her vision and she smiled as he held his hand out to her. Long fingers curled around hers and a shudder of pure rapture rippled the length of her spine.

"I cannot imagine life without you," she whispered breathlessly.

He laughed and leaned back in his chair, brilliant sapphire eyes thoughtful as his head tilted to one side.

"You cannot seem to exist without me, my pet," he acknowledged. His voice, a low murmur of rich sound, expressed his mild surprise at the truth they both understood so well.

"Why would I want to, LaCroix? You have given me everything," she noted gently. Her eyes caressed his features, the handsome, beloved face she never tired of touching, or looking at. Nothing about him ever repelled her, even his madness was something that seduced her. And, LaCroix had known the darkest kinds of madness in their time together. She had driven herself into the shadows to shelter him, and had freely given her life to keeping him safe when others of their kind would have wished him truly dead. His blood lusts, his domination, his cruelty, all were facets of his nature. She refused to accept anything else. Even her love for Nicholas Knight could not dim the devotion to this master she adored.

"Will there ever be a time when you no longer deem me the centre of your world, ma bein-aimé?" LaCroix wondered, his tone tinged with irony.

"Never, mon amour," she answered instantly. She moved into his arms, settled against the strength of his tall frame as he pulled her closer.

LaCroix's hands framed her face and forced wide grey eyes to meet his gaze. For endless moments they simply stared at each other, then he bent to claim her lips in a kiss that bound minds, hearts, and, perhaps, the souls they should no longer have possessed. . .

Gabrielle groaned again as the beauty of the memory shattered into hated reality. They were opening the barred cage door, and she scented the flow of warm blood. Reason drowned beneath the sudden surge of hunger and she leapt without warning.

Her scream of rage and pain tore through the hollow cell as the chains snapped her back into a crumpled heap. She'd forgotten momentarily, and the shackles had been stretched to their

limit by her motion. Momentum flung her backward, left her writhing on the stone floors.

"LaCroix . . ."

It was a keening screech of despair. She felt the tears begin again, and tried not to allow them to see her weakness. His name, voiced so clearly, had slipped from her before she could suppress it. Once they had started, the flow of misery-induced tears seemed far too vast for her parched body to contain. Still, the sobs wracked her, and obliterated the horrible hunger with a greater need -- one infinitely more profound to Gabrielle, but equally out of reach.

* * *

Evann watched her for a long time, unmoved by the horror of her piteous cries. LaCroix's name was a litany in the woman's mind, his face the lifeline to her sanity. Bolivar had thought her broken. It annoyed him to realise that her love for LaCroix, of all men, was emerging as her salvation.

He was snatched from his reverie by Marc's unexpected arrival. He spun away from his monitors and scanned the slightly dishevelled appearance of his friend. Without waiting for an invitation, Marc strode to the bar and poured himself a large glass of Evann's best stock. He downed it, poured another and finally dared to look directly at Evann.

"LaCroix is searching for you," he said without preamble. "And, he's finding allies. No one is happy to think that one of our own can be responsible for Gabrielle's abduction."

Evann felt the tide of Marc's panic, and he smiled. The expression didn't appear to reassure his friend. Evann's smile grew wider. He crossed to the bar and joined Marc in a drink. For several more minutes he remained silent and thoughtful, mulled the implications of Marc's news. It wasn't unforeseen, but he hadn't anticipated LaCroix's discovery quite this soon. Especially when it was proving all but impossible to bend Gabrielle to his needs.

"LaCroix will find more enemies than allies, Marc," Evann said at length. "It's nothing to create a panic over."

Marc snorted his contempt of that assessment, and quickly drained his glass a second time.

"We are talking about Lucien LaCroix, Evann, not some inept fledgling pretending at grandeur." He shuddered, chilled with the dread he'd been plagued with in recent weeks. He wanted to plead with Evann, to make him see the insanity of his present course of action, but something in the oddly coloured eyes stilled the protests. And, for the first time in the many years they'd known each other, Marc feared Evann.

"LaCroix is an anachronism, and, therefore, a danger," Bolivar stated with eerie calm.

"LaCroix is the leader of our community, Evann," Marc insisted, in what he knew was a futile attempt to dissuade the other vampire.

"Fear does not translate into loyalty, Marc."

"Fear is fear," Dennison hissed in an undertone. "And fear is something we are all familiar with, old friend. LaCroix is not a man to be underestimated, Evann. This woman is not merely one of his favoured children, she is his chosen mate. He'll destroy us for taking her from him."

"You assume she means that much to him," Evann laughed harshly.

"Isn't that what you're counting on!" Marc snarled in sudden, irrational anger. "Isn't that why we took her? To lure him. You're beginning to sound as mad as you claim he is, Evann. Make up your mind, is Gabrielle bait, or amusement for your warped sense of humour?"

Bolivar's patience ran out and he grabbed his friend with an abruptness that shocked Marc into silence.

"Be very careful what you say to me, Marc," he advised with a small smile. "LaCroix's whore holds no appeal for me. I've never been pushed to seek my pleasure in company that low, old friend."

Marc shivered. The insult was born of pure malice, and not a little envy, he knew. Evann attracted many women, most of their kind did, but none had ever remained with the enigmatic vampire. Most often, they learned to detest Evann, and fear him to such an extent that they frequently disappeared altogether from whatever city they resided in. There had only ever been one exception, but it was she, not Evann, who was the true power anyway. Many years had passed since their last meeting with her. Despite Bolivar's feigned disdain, Marc knew that Gabrielle Sinclair was the type of woman Evann had always been drawn to; lovely, intelligent, strong, and extremely passionate. And the glimpses of her unguarded dreams had revealed the intensely sexual side of her love for LaCroix.

The thought came to Marc, unbidden, unexpected: *Gabrielle would rend Evann limb from limb if he attempted to touch her as her lover would.*

Evann read the thought, naked as it was in Marc's mind, and he laughed with pure delight. He released the other vampire and strode back to again take up his vigil at the monitor. She'd stopped crying and was curled into a tight ball, all but hidden in the farthest corner of the dank cell. The masses of red hair that obscured her face were tangled and filthy. Her clothes were torn and stained with blood, her own and the small amounts they'd permitted her to consume since her capture. Beneath the ragged exterior, Evann glimpsed the beauty and sensuality that drew an ancient like LaCroix, and held him bound.

"Don't, Evann!" Marc pleaded when Bolivar snapped off the video and headed for the door.

Evann hesitated for an instant, then he gestured toward the blank screen. "By all means, watch, if it will amuse you, Marc?" He knew the cruelty his remark exhibited, and shrugged when the other man's eyes darkened dangerously. As he'd expected, Marc held his retort in check and left the room from the main door.

* * *

LaCroix glided into the studio of CERK radio station and nodded absently at the technician who waited to begin their four hour show. 'The Night Crawler' was smiling for the first time in days, and no one appeared anxious to say anything to alter that welcome change in attitude.

LaCroix settled into his chair and drew the microphone closer to him. He leaned toward

the device and when he greeted his audience, his silken voice was a purr of seductive satisfaction.

"Another beautiful night, boys and girls . . . A night made for madness . . . And vengeance . . . She's still out there, gentle listeners . . . My lady . . . But not for much longer . . . The Night Crawler is close to you, Evann . . . I want you . . . And I will have **whatever** I desire . . . Ask her, Evann . . . She'll tell you what you've done . . . Tell her I'll see her too . . . Tell her I remember our last meeting . . ."

He resisted the urge to laugh as he contemplated the impending demise of this arrogant upstart who had dared to challenge him. The night had been profitable, so far, and he anticipated victory hovering on the edge of his awareness.

* * *

Nick smiled grimly as he listened to the alluring voice. He knew that tone intimately. LaCroix had found something that would destroy Evann Bolivar, and he was taunting yet another victim into his trap. There were few who could resist the master vampire's call, but Knight suspected this man, Bolivar, might be one of those rare entities. Evann had to be strong, or at the very least believe himself to be, because otherwise, only a complete fool would risk LaCroix's rage. The hint of a second target didn't go unnoted either, but Nick needed answers more than he needed another wealth of speculations and questions.

Despite the realisation that he was late for work, he followed the impulse that made him turn toward The Raven; and the one person who might know what was driving both LaCroix and Evann Bolivar.

* * *

"Gabrielle?"

She heard the quiet murmur of sound, and ice kissed her spine when she recognised the note of power within the lilting voice. Not the intrinsic power that resonated in LaCroix's tones, but a strength that echoed of another's support. Curiosity forced her gaze upward, and the chill grew inside her.

She drew back, inched away from his approach until the damp wall was a solid resistance to further movement. Hatred rose within her in the seconds that it took him to close the distance between them. He squatted down in front of her and brushed aside her hair. His touch was colder than LaCroix's could ever be.

"He's left you to die here, Gabrielle," Evann said with a regret so falsely sincere she might have believed him -- had she been anyone other than LaCroix's mistress.

"I have died for LaCroix before," she replied in a voice rusty with misuse and ravaged by pain.

"Why?" Evann asked, again in the oddly sincere tone. This time, it was truly more genuine, because he was intrigued in spite of himself.

Gabrielle smiled, but refused to answer. Some things were not worthy of response.

"Would you like to leave this cell?" Bolivar enquired softly. He heard the uneasy shuffle of feet behind him. The few mortals who lived with them were loyal, but they had all been frightened by Gabrielle's rage. It would require one of them to free her, and Evann knew none would do it willingly.

Again, she simply stared at him. For a long time, Evann waited for an answer. She used the introspective moments to compose her thoughts, to banish the numbing loneliness to a corner of her heart that she could temporarily ignore.

"At what price?" she finally questioned.

Evann smiled, and his fingers traced the curve of her cheek.

"I simply wish to know you better," he replied.

Gabrielle nodded seriously, then, after a brief pause, laughed with obvious irony.

"I prefer my own company to your attempts at seduction," she hissed with vehement fury. Before he had time to move, she struck him a blow that tumbled him to the floor.

Evann's rage boiled to the surface of his mind and he grabbed at her, his hands coiling through her hair as he slammed her into the stone wall. He pulled her up with him as he stood, and then glared down into her recalcitrant, flickering grey eyes. He bent his head to hers and she spit at him. He rewarded her gesture by sinking his fangs into her throat, the strike savage and meant to inflict pain. She shuddered and tried to squirm free of his grasp, her fists pushed futilely at his chest.

As he sipped from her depleted veins, Evann pierced the veil of memory and lifted it from her mind. In that fleeting weakness, he saw LaCroix attack her as he just had, and felt her slip toward death as her master's rage drained her of defiance and life . . .

He was so enrapt in her thoughts that he barely heard the exclamation of panic that Marc uttered as he ran into the cell to join them.

"Evann!" Marc tugged at his friend, tried to pull him away from LaCroix's lover. Gabrielle's eyes fluttered open. She smiled at him, and the expression elevated his terror to new heights. "Leave her, Evann! She's killing you!" With a final effort born of abject fright, Marc hauled the other man free of the lovely redhead.

Evann turned, unwilling to lose her essence, and Marc shook him violently. Slowly, the haze dissipated and he turned huge eyes to her. She had fallen to the floor again and stared up at them, indifference and mild triumph amid the shifting hues of her gaze. Marc's angry voice penetrated the final shreds of the daze that held Evann, and he glanced at his concerned friend.

"I'm all right, Marc," he whispered, shaken badly.

"She's a **natural** psychic, Evann," Marc snarled. "She could have killed you!"

Bolivar conceded the truth with a nod and spun back to face Gabrielle. His arrogance had assumed he'd breached her mind, he now knew it had occurred because she'd permitted it. And then she had used it to her own purpose. Marc was right, she could be very dangerous, and Evann would not underestimate her a second time.

Before he could chose a proper vengeance, a whisper within his mind drew his attention away. He gestured for Marc to precede him from the cell, and heard the metallic clang of the barred door banging firmly into place.

* * *

Gabrielle shivered in the silent gloom, Evann's attack was all but forgotten as she sought the murmur of power that had called him away. It was close, but she couldn't reach it. She did know, beyond any doubt, that it was not LaCroix, despite the vastness of age that rippled the tendril of psychic energy.

* * *

"Stavros?"

The Enforcer did not turn at the soft enquiry of his name. He had known that Knight would eventually come to him. He'd been anticipating the meeting since the evening of Gabrielle's abduction.

"Who has her?" Nick asked as he took the vacant seat opposite the ancient vampire.

"LaCroix's been asking that very question," Stavros replied after a lengthy pause. "He has the right to, Nicholas. Why do you want the information?"

"To help him," Nick admitted quietly. "I think he needs help this time, don't you?"

"You haven't been inclined to assist your master in the past, Nicholas," the Enforcer noted diffidently, and emphasised very slightly the words 'your master'.

"This is still more survival instinct than desire to please LaCroix," Knight remarked with a hint of irony. "If LaCroix loses her, we'll all suffer in some way for it."

Stavros smiled grimly.

"You have a rare gift for understatement, Nick," he commented dryly.

Something in the other's manner alerted Nick, and he leaned closer, the action unconscious.

"Is that why you've been so helpful? Are you trying to prevent a blood bath? Or," the suggestion came slowly, cautiously, "incite him to one?"

The Enforcer's dark eyes flashed with fury.

"Be very careful, Nicholas. LaCroix is not here to protect you this time, and I'm in no mood to tolerate your impudence. I've served your master for vast lifetimes longer than your existence, and LaCroix's authority has never been questioned." He paused, then met the younger man's wary gaze. "Until now."

"What?"

"The fool who took Gabrielle is a pawn, the game now underway has the design of an experienced hand, Nicholas. LaCroix feels he knows who seeks to confront him." Stavros grew thoughtful, measured the knowledge as though for the first time. "He may be right? I hope he's not."

"Is his enemy so powerful?"

"Powerful?" Stavros savoured the word, then shook his head, a wry smile flickering briefly across handsome features. "No, not in the way that you mean. But, in a war such as this may be, old wounds left untended can be more troublesome than any new ones incurred."

"I do want to help him, Stavros," Nicholas admitted, with some surprise to himself.

"He doesn't want your help, Nickola," Janette inserted as she entered the room and came to a halt beside the golden haired knight. "He doesn't want anyone's help this time."

"Has that stopped us in the past?" Knight questioned with a crooked smile. She grinned down at him as she perched on the arm of his chair, then bent to kiss him. He let the caress linger, enjoyed the familiar rush of intense, loving desire that no woman other than Janette had ever evoked within him.

"He does needs us, Nickola," she whispered. "But, he does not want us."

"He may lose her."

"Then I pity those who have taken her," Janette shuddered delicately. A frown creased her beautiful face, and she nodded to herself, a decision made. "LaCroix loves her, Nick," she told the former knight. "He will not be reasonable."

"Where is he, Janette?"

She looked past Nick to meet the watchful stare of the Enforcer who had silently observed their exchange.

"Evann?" she enquired softly.

"I don't know," Stavros confessed with an icy smile. "Call it an educated guess."

"You know where he is staying?"

He smiled more genuinely at the exquisite brunette.

"LaCroix taught you both better than that," the older vampire noted as he rose. He started to leave the club, then paused at the door. He turned back to them. "Tell him not to allow his rage to cloud his judgement." Even as he spoke the words, all three sensed the futility of attempting to curb LaCroix's fury -- he was rarely beyond reason, but this time . . . This time there could conceivably be no way to stop his thirst for vengeance.

* * *

Zoe laughed quietly as she stretched languidly in the large bed. She loved the feel of silk sheets against her naked skin, especially after love-making. Dark hair streamed over the sky blue shimmer of the pillows, and her equally dark gaze strayed casually over the man who lay next to her.

"I thought you would have missed me much more, querida mia." Her voice, always throaty and seductive, was rougher than usual at the moment, but there was no mistaking the irony that laced her quiet words with ice.

Odd coloured eyes met her shrewd stare when he turned to look at her.

"Are you disappointed by my welcome, Zoe?" he questioned, and smiled warmly.

"Your welcome, no," she shrugged one shoulder. "I resent your thoughts being elsewhere while you entertain me, Evann."

"They were not -- "

"LaCroix's whore fascinates you," she interrupted smoothly. "And you wondered if taking her would be as exciting as your play time with me."

"Zoe . . . "

She laughed again. "Not to worry, Evann," she assured him in a voice that was anything

but reassuring. "If LaCroix doesn't reclaim the bitch, you may have her as a pet. I'm sure he has trained her for many amusements."

"You don't understand their bond, Zoe," he answered, after pulling himself into a sitting position with his back to the wall. "She'll die before anyone else touches her. And, she'll kill anyone who poses a threat to him."

Zoe heard the taint of puzzlement in his tone, and slithered from the bed. She slipped a heavy silk kimono over her shoulders, then walked to the window.

"You can't understand why she would remain loyal to him," she surmised thoughtfully. "What fatal attraction he holds for her."

"Interesting choice of words, my beloved," he remarked wryly.

"He's an addiction, Evann," she murmured, as much to herself as to the man who shared her bed. "More potent than can be easily imagined. He is . . . He is power, and salvation, even while he is eternal damnation . . . Lucien LaCroix is a man none could begin to effectively define."

Evann's eyes narrowed as he absorbed the shock of her unexpected words, and the breathless tone of her voice. Zoe was not prone to romantic whimsy, nor was she likely to be influenced by any man's charms.

"You sound as though you love him yourself," he tossed at her as he searched for his clothes among the discarded garments that were heaped on the floor.

Her silence was not the solace he'd sought.

* * *

Gabrielle felt the new presence that filled the house, it was an ancient who walked the floors above her prison. She also detected the faint trace of LaCroix's blood in the newcomer. She wondered if the woman, for she knew instinctively it was another woman, would help her. Or, would she destroy her? Gabrielle searched the fragile mental threads that filtered downward to her. She was the source of much thought from this stranger. The redhead allowed her mind to open, the relaxing experimental. She hissed in a sharp gasp of air when rage struck back like a physical blow.

Jealousy and fury combined to assault Gabrielle's senses, and she immediately shielded her mind from further pain. In the brief moments of contact, Gabrielle had learned much about her enemy. She'd been right, this was one of LaCroix's first creations. Zoe was her name. And, she had come to reclaim the master vampire's allegiance. Deeper truths were hidden now, carefully guarded by the other woman.

Gabrielle braced herself for the meeting she knew was only minutes away.

* * *

"You were right about LaCroix's pet, Evann," Zoe laughed quietly. "She's full of surprises."

Evann dropped her hairbrush back on the dresser and turned to face her. He'd dressed

and showered, and still she remained as he'd left her, gazing thoughtfully out the open window.

"She knows you're here?" Despite his desire to appear unconcerned, he heard the faint note of worry that coloured his tone.

"She knows," Zoe confirmed in a voice barely above a whisper. "She's stronger than I realised. I would have thought her broken by now. So many of his playthings were weak and unworthy of his attention."

Again Evann had the uncanny feeling she spoke more from a deeply repressed love than real hate. For the first time since she'd found him, Evann doubted her, and wondered if his own place in her life had been part of a much larger plan aimed at the ancient master vampire.

"Why did you want her, Zoe?" Evann asked cautiously. "Why Gabrielle, when it could just as easily have been Nicholas, or Janette. He still cares for them, and would not see either of them destroyed."

"This one was chosen by him to share his eternal life, Evann," Zoe said as she finally met his curious stare. "She is his lover, and the keeper of his soul." At the sceptical snort he couldn't suppress, she laughed, this time the sound was ice. "You don't believe us capable of retaining souls? I assure you, young Evann, even within this darkness we exist in, love can create its own miracles. LaCroix lives, because this one would not accept his death. What would you call that?"

The challenge was a tangible presence in the room with them. Gradually, the tension eased and Evann nodded.

"You still haven't answered me, my love," he gently pointed out.

"I want her, because he does," she shrugged. "She'll watch him die this time, Evann, and then she can join him." She felt the jolt of fear her words sparked in him and her gaze narrowed dangerously. "If you want to amuse yourself with her first, be my guest, Evann." She smiled. "Just rest assured you will no longer share my bed after you've sampled Lucien's slut."

Evann composed his thoughts and slipped a familiar masque over his features. He rose from her dressing table and went to take her in his arms. She moulded herself to him and laughed with arrogant satisfaction.

"LaCroix's whore could not begin to compare to you, Zoe," he breathed with amazing sincerity. They both ignored the lie.

"She's expecting me to grant her an audience," Zoe murmured minutes later. Her lips moved against his, the words a whisper of air in his mouth.

"Gabrielle can be dangerous, Zoe," he warned. "Be careful."

"She's nothing, Evann," the dark haired vampire stated. "Tell Marc I will want to see him after I've had a chat with our guest."

He recognised the tone and left her without further conversation.

* * *

Evann stumbled in the hallway; the sudden shock of power that filled the shadowy corridor was numbing. He knew the presence before his eyes found the figure near the top of

the stairs, and his heart contracted with fear.

"LaCroix searches for you."

"Why tell me?" Evann countered quietly. "You made it clear where your loyalty lies, yet you warn me."

"I am offering you the chance to prevent a war among our kind, young Evann. Don't confuse that with loyalties of any sort."

"She won't be stopped," the young vampire reluctantly confessed. His eyes still peered into the shadows, frustratingly unable to pierce the darkness that surrounded the stranger. They'd met like this once before, and despite the recognition of presence, Evann did not truly know to whom he spoke.

"That is unfortunate."

Evann shivered at the note of genuine regret in the ancient voice. Fear solidified in the pit of his stomach, and he clutched the bannister of the extended staircase.

"Does he know where . . . ?"

"Not yet," answered the low, unnerving voice. "But it may not be so for much longer."

Evann trembled with undeniable relief when a rush of cold air chilled the hallway for a moment, followed by an emptiness that was eerie and distinctly unsettling.

* * *

Zoe winced slightly when she approached the doorway that led to the basement of the estate. The human servants quickly darted ahead of her and swung the heavy door outward, effectively shielding her from the proximity of the silver crucifix that adorned the barrier.

They preceded her into the cellar and she smiled when the crosses that were scattered everywhere were swiftly covered to allow her comfortable passage. She felt the stir of psychic energy long before she reached the cell, she'd been aware of it growing consistently stronger with each step she took toward the lower levels of the huge house.

The last door clanged open and Zoe stepped into the murky cell, smiling at the filth and indignity she'd forced LaCroix's lover to accept. The attendant mortals couldn't get out of the dank room quickly enough, and Zoe ignored them. She waited, aware that Gabrielle knew she was present.

The redhead slowly emerged from the corner she'd been huddled into and took a shaky step forward. For a second, visible tremors wracked her body, then they were buried beneath determined will. She was much like the Master she adored, even in this small detail. LaCroix had taught her well, as he had few others of his line. She straightened and her head rose, she met Zoe's gaze with a calm that was infuriating.

"You're not like most of his spawn," Zoe noted with contempt.

"No," Gabrielle agreed, her features serene. "Most others are like you."

Zoe's response was instinctive, her hand rose and sought to strike. Gabrielle's eyes flared red and the older vampire gasped in astonished pain when she was flung backward into the steel bars of the cage.

"Bitch!" she hissed and stumbled forward again, then recovered her balance. Zoe could

feel the weakening in Gabrielle, the defiance had cost her too much of the fragile strength she had left.

"What do you want?"

Zoe was startled by the amusement in the other woman's low voice. Even with her suffering, LaCroix's companion could find peace, an understanding that angered Zoe all the more.

"He searches for you," she answered with a measure of her usual arrogance. "When I decide he can find you, he may even still want you. Though I would not place too much faith in LaCroix's loyalty, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle nodded. "You would have no reason to, Zoe." She laughed quietly when the other woman bristled slightly.

"He belonged to me long before you ever knew him," Zoe said softly, her eyes suddenly distant, reaching back to another place, another time.

"Lucien has belonged to no one," Gabrielle smiled. "Even now, he is no woman's possession. But, he is capable of bonds beyond those that you can comprehend."

"And you think he shares this bond with you?" Zoe's voice was flat and hard, icy with contempt.

Gabrielle shrugged and walked back to the corner of the cell. She deliberately kept her back to the other, and slowly eased down to a seat against the wall. The chains that trapped her limbs rattled hollowly as she tried to find a comfortable position, one that would allow her to block her pain, and her hunger.

Zoe was furious. She wanted a confrontation, a fight. Something. This blindly trusting faith in LaCroix was absurd. She refused to acknowledge the true cause of her anger -- fear that the other woman might conceivably be right in her security. She strode from the room, but not before she yanked the chains tighter, and restricted Gabrielle's movement further. The soft gasp of anguish her brutality elicited restored a small measure of her good humour.

* * *

Evann whirled in fright when the door to his study was flung inward. He relaxed slightly when he saw who it was, then turned to finish giving orders to evacuate the estate.

"What the hell are you doing, Evann?" Zoe snarled. "I gave no order to leave this house."

"Someone's been here, Zoe," he told her when they were alone. "Someone who can bring destruction down on us."

"Who?"

"I don't know," he answered honestly. "But he's old, and powerful. I think he knows Gabrielle is here."

"How could he?" She was still sceptical, though not as secure as she had been earlier. The meeting with Gabrielle had not proceeded as she would have wished, and she found herself edgy and irritable as a result of it.

"I don't know, Zoe," Evann repeated, his own frustration making his voice sharp and

too loud. "I do know if we want to survive, we have to leave."

"Fine," Zoe relented. "Get her ready."

"You can't be serious," he sputtered. "She's almost dead now, leave her to rot!"

"I'm not through with her yet," the ancient vampire replied. "I want to make them both suffer, Evann, and I will."

He resisted the urge to call her a fool and a lunatic, only because he wasn't sure he could afford the time to deal with her properly if she attacked him.

"If you want Gabrielle, Zoe, deal with it yourself, I'm busy at the moment."

She was stunned into silence, and the seconds were all he required to leave her there, gaping at the space he'd occupied moments before.

* * *

Nick slipped into the house unnoticed, his vampiric senses attuned to the silence. It didn't feel right. It was decidedly unnatural, and his stomach twisted with trepidation when he caught the first heavy scent of freshly spilled blood. It was followed minutes later by a shriek of rage that tore the night apart with its torment.

LaCroix!

Knight all but flew to the lowest level of the house, dodging bodies that had been rended and drained in various stages. The human servants had served to whet LaCroix's appetite for true revenge. Nick's heart was in his throat when he reached the cell and saw his master.

LaCroix was kneeling on the floor, the tattered remains of a jacket clutched in one of his hands, lengths of chain in the other. His eyes were wild, burned red fury, and his voice was a savage growl, base, totally inhuman. He turned toward Nicholas, and the younger man recoiled in the face of LaCroix's blood-maddened rage. Beyond the master vampire's anger was the cause for it, Nick felt the whisper of anguish and horror that lingered in the air -- a taunt to the man who was quickly becoming ever more insane with his loss.

"We'll find her, LaCroix," he offered uncertainly.

LaCroix slowly forced his mind to focus, his fury to subside. He needed to think clearly, it was his only chance of recovering his lover.

"She's near death," he eventually told Nick, his normally even voice a shaken rasp of sound. "They're driving her into madness, Nicholas."

"She's strong, LaCroix," the younger man stated firmly. He wanted desperately to believe what he said, more than that, he needed for LaCroix to believe it.

LaCroix smiled, the expression devoid of any compassion or warmth, certainly no gratitude for the knight's attempt to assuage his grief. He reached out and in a sadistic instant of rage, he hauled Nick to him and found the soft pulse in the other vampire's neck. Their blood mingled, as it hadn't for many, many years, and in the exchange, LaCroix poured Gabrielle's agony into his child's mind. He felt perverse enjoyment of Nick's struggle, his revulsion for what had happened to the auburn haired psychic, as well as what was happening to him at that moment.

"LaCroix! Stop it! Non!!"

Janette's voice pierced the haze of death that held the two men locked together, joined in a bond centuries older than the loves that drove them ever apart, yet held them eternally one.

Her arms supported Nick when LaCroix all but flung the golden haired knight away from him. He paced the squalid cell, and his rage reignited inside him. He'd destroy those who'd taken her. And he would relish it tremendously.

"We have to find her, Janette," Nick whispered, his eyes still watched every move LaCroix made, wariness and fear in their depths.

"Stavros is not far behind me, Nickola," she informed him, her own gaze drawn irresistibly to LaCroix. "He wants LaCroix." She hesitated on the final piece of news, then sighed heavily. "Marc Dennison is dead, he was staked."

"The Enforcers think LaCroix killed him?"

"They believe it is how he knew about this house."

LaCroix laughed wildly at the illogical conclusions.

"I did not need to destroy Marc to get that information," he noted darkly.

"That remains to be seen, old friend," Stavros announced as he entered the room. He shuddered at the resonances his finely tuned senses plucked from the air. "She does love you, LaCroix," he noted quietly, a trace of mild envy in his whispered words.

"She is part of me, Stavros," LaCroix smiled ironically. "Some would say the best part. I intend to find her, and you had better hope she is still alive."

"I'm afraid that will have to wait."

LaCroix had taken a step toward the door, and his eyes flared instantly when the exit was blocked by the bulk of several huge Enforcers, members of the special legion Stavros commanded, those totally loyal to their leader.

"You dare . . . ?" LaCroix began.

"The Code has been broken tonight," Stavros decreed solemnly. "Several times. And all evidence points to you, LaCroix."

For an eternity of minutes, no one moved. LaCroix and Stavros stared, each measuring the sincerity of the other's strength. Nick and Janette waited, clung together. The raven haired beauty almost collapsed in Nick's arms when LaCroix nodded his acceptance. He paused to look closely at them, then his eyes locked briefly with Nick's.

"Find her, Nicholas."

The knight knew he did not mean Gabrielle.

* * *

Nick and Janette watched the impossible happen, LaCroix was led away, and they remained. Janette recovered first, took the former knight by the arm and they headed out of the house. Once in the fresh night air, she turned to look closely at Nick.

"What are we going to do?"

"Split up," Nick answered instantly. "You go back to The Raven and see if anyone knows who's behind this. Meanwhile, I have an old friend of ours to find."

"An old friend?" Janette repeated. "Which 'old friend' are you talking about, Nickola?"

Nick smiled, kissed her, and was gone without another word.
Janette glared at his retreat, then she, too, disappeared into the shadows of the night.

* * *

Gabrielle barely felt the rough stone beneath her. She no longer had the energy to fight for life. LaCroix had not found her, and she'd been moved further out of the city. In her weakened state, even if she had been able to pierce the shielding that prevented her psychic voice from reaching him, she knew she didn't have the strength to make use of the talent.

Zoe was nearby, the redhead could feel the malevolent presence as a contagion in the very air. She was completely obsessed, and beyond all reason. Zoe believed LaCroix to be hers, in heart, soul, and body. The psychic had read the hatreds in Zoe's mind, the resentment that had been fostered for nearly two thousand years. She hated Nicholas, and Janette, and many others, but she had chosen Gabrielle because LaCroix loved her in a way apart from the bonds he felt for his favoured children. Gabrielle was the consort Zoe had always wanted to be to him.

Pain had become a tangible part of her existence throughout the past weeks, yet Gabrielle smiled inwardly. She was near death, and much of the torture Zoe subjected her to seemed apart from her now, unable to touch more than the surface of her mind. She was naked, bleeding what little blood remained within her veins, and she knew if she could care, she'd see that her body was a map of scars and still open wounds. She wasn't able to heal properly, there was never enough fresh blood in her system, and she wasn't permitted to sleep deeply enough to effect the changes necessary to the recovery her body needed.

Her wrists, shackled once again, were burned raw, crosses embedded so deeply into her flesh that she was certain that if she did live she'd wear these marks permanently, as she did the one above her left breast. Remnants, all, of the price she'd paid in this life, and one almost three centuries past, for loving Lucien LaCroix. Yet, had a choice been offered, she would change nothing.

Movement near the door attracted her erratic attention and she turned her head just enough to see who entered. Her eyes met Zoe's, read the macabre pleasure in their soulless depths, and fear awoke deep inside her. She had thought herself beyond caring what happened to her, but some part of her could still be reached it seemed. The dark haired woman placed two bottles of blood on the stone floor, then straightened to look again at her captive. The ornate, long handled dagger now visible in Zoe's hand filled Gabrielle's vision, and the hands that caressed it evoked greater horror.

Gabrielle tried to pull back, away from the approaching figure, but she didn't have the strength to do more than shake her head in denial.

Zoe squatted down beside the helpless woman and grinned at the unconcealed terror in Gabrielle's huge grey eyes. She ran a gentle hand the length of the redhead's spine, caressed once smooth skin. She laughed softly when Gabrielle's muscles tensed in futile rejection of the touch.

"No!" It was a weak gasp of air, unwillingly torn from Gabrielle's throat. She felt tears

well in her eyes when Zoe's fingers stroked over her thighs, then parted them. When she tried to get away from the offensive touch, Zoe's fist slammed into the curve of her back. Agony swirled into her consciousness, a red fog that cloaked the sensations of an assault her entire being recoiled against. She felt the knife, the razor edge of it slicing open her flesh, the heavy handle forcing its way into her, guided by Zoe's skillful, merciless hand.

LaCroix's face hovered before her mind's eye, then fragmented when she could no longer hold on to the beloved image. As the lifeline of his love grew ever more distant, Gabrielle finally accepted defeat.

* * *

It had been twenty four hours since the horrible meeting in the cellars of Evann's estate. Janette gave her hair a final inspection, then, satisfied, she headed into her club. The Raven was alive with people already, and she hoped that the continuous flow of life and laughter would lighten her mood. She hadn't heard from Nick yet, and she couldn't shake the feeling that before too many more days passed, a great many lives could be irrevocably changed.

The music thrummed louder with each step she took and she paused for a moment before stepping into the club's busy, noisy main room. She smiled, the response unconscious, and walked into the bar, her sharp eyes picking out familiar faces as she went, as well as making mental note of who could be potentially troublesome before the end of the night's business.

She spotted them just as she reached the bar, and her smile froze. Anger whispered in her mind, caressed her suddenly elongated fangs with the bitter taste of desired vengeance. She forced herself to an outward calm she didn't feel, then approached the couple. They awaited her now, alert to the sudden flare of undeniable power within the beautiful vampire.

"Evann," she greeted him without warmth, her emotions held carefully in check. "You have a great deal of nerve coming here, of all places."

"Why is that, Janette?" he asked, though neither of them was fooled by the cavalier tone he attempted.

"Iris, isn't it?" Janette enquired of the small blonde woman at his side. It took only a few moments of observation to see that the girl was thoroughly enchanted with Evann, and far too easily led to be of any real threat to anyone other than herself.

"It's been a long time, Janette," Evann said, deliberately drawing the older woman's attention back to him.

"Not long enough, I'm afraid," she smiled. "You've become a fool since our last meeting, my young one."

"You never knew me, Janette," he laughed, careful to keep his look firmly on her. "Not when you left me for dead, and certainly not now."

"Non," she agreed with a nod. "But I do recall that I seldom took my pleasure with fools, Evann. So, that does not explain what has become of you."

"You're talking in riddles, ma chérie," he said into her ear.

"You should never have touched Gabrielle," Janette replied, and accepted the wine glass Miklos slid across the bar to her. "I have never been overly fond of her, but LaCroix is not to

be trifled with, Evann. He's dangerous, especially when you try to take from him what he does not want to relinquish."

"I had nothing to do with the abduction of LaCroix's pet," Evann informed her, his tone flat, and filled with contempt.

Janette nodded, her expression thoughtful. "You speak like a man who despises her, but I suspect that is not quite the truth."

"She's a mindless slave to his whims and insanity," Evann retorted. "What interest could she be to anyone?"

"She's much more than a mindless slave, my young friend," Janette denied. "She's the key to LaCroix's present equanimity, and none of us wish to see that end."

"I wish I could help," he answered with an expansive shrug. "But . . ."

"You don't lie well, Evann," Janette snarled, her tone low and pitched so that only he would hear. She leaned closer and slender, gloved fingers curled around his wrist and tightened until his eyes grew wider. "Tell whoever was deranged enough to plan this madness that LaCroix will have his lover back, and the payment for her pain will most assuredly be death if she is not returned soon. I don't care how you do this, Evann, but see that it's done. He knows you are involved, and it is simply a question of time before he finds you himself."

"The Enforcers have him," Iris put in, her eyes huge with fright, and confusion. "He killed Marc."

"LaCroix is a law none of us can censure!" Janette snapped impatiently. "Listen to me, Evann. For all our sakes, do not allow this to continue." She spun on her heel and left them in a swirl of subtle perfume and air that was chilled with fear.

Evann wondered why she had permitted him to remain free, then another voice came back to haunt him; *'I am offering you the chance to prevent a war among our kind, young Evann.'*

Janette had just made the same offer.

* * *

Nicholas surveyed the crumbling castle in silent repugnance. He'd taken a week off work, if only to avoid Natalie's questions and Schanke's constant scrutiny. The past few nights had given them plenty of reason to wonder what the hell was going on with him, and he needed to be free to focus on the task LaCroix had given him. He didn't look too closely at his reasons for being so determined not to let the master vampire down, and insisted that it was to avoid a potentially disastrous uprising within the vampire community.

He'd felt the almost forgotten brush of LaCroix's mind reaching to him hours earlier, and in spite of the years that had built walls between them, Nick had discovered that his master's thoughts were still easily accessible to him when LaCroix wanted it that way. It was LaCroix who had led him to this place, though how he'd known she would be found here was a mystery to the knight.

Nick scanned the narrow windows and the grounds, no sign of life could be seen. Yet, there was undeniably a sense of power and life within the grey walls. He opened his mind and

concentrated his entire being on a woman he wasn't fully sure would recognise him if she was able to hear him. He jerked back a step moments later, the reaction involuntary. Pain, tinged with madness, whispered to him. He couldn't distinguish the identity of the woman, only that they did, in fact, share a common blood.

His presence was no longer a secret, so he walked boldly toward the door. The dread that filled his heart refused to be ignored, and a fear he hadn't felt in many years threatened his resolve. When he reached the entrance, he paused, steadied his nerves, then went inside.

* * *

Zoe waited at the top of a collapsed staircase, one hand rested gracefully on the rail that fell away into darkness. The moonlight that streamed through one of the broken windows bathed her in a glow of silver white, created an illusion of beauty that was enticing and warm.

She smiled, and called him to her.

* * *

Nick stopped at the foot of the wrecked stairs, and his expression was carefully neutral when he looked up at her. It had been over a century since he'd last seen her, but in their current setting, it might have been yesterday. She hadn't aged, of course, but she had changed. There was a look in her eyes that had never been there before, one that reflected rage, and insanity, and more hatred than he'd ever witnessed in anyone, mortal or vampire.

"Zoe," he addressed her formally, bowed, and flew to stand at her side.

"You change so little, Nicholas," she commented, irony and mild disdain in the quiet words. "Why hasn't he come?"

* * *

"He should have found her by now, Stavros," LaCroix snarled as he paced the long length of his study. "I should never have agreed to this."

"You didn't have much choice, as I recall," the Enforcer replied with a shrug.

"I always have a choice, Stavros," the master vampire reminded his friend. "If anyone understands that, I should think you would."

"You have stated on many occasions that you would trust Nicholas with your life," the dark haired man said. "So, trust him."

"It is not my life that is in his hands," LaCroix hissed.

Stavros laughed quietly. "It might as well be, Lucien, he knows that."

LaCroix glowered silently and resumed his restless pacing.

* * *

Zoe led Nick to a huge, restored sitting room. He glanced around at the dated opulence

of the decor, felt oddly out of time, and turned his cautious gaze to the woman who watched his every motion. Zoe herself was something from another era, and her flowing white gown emphasised the mirage, while drawing attention to the regal beauty of her face and figure. Black hair was coiled in an elaborate knot, her equally dark eyes were enhanced by skillfully applied make-up, and the clinging silk of her gown defined every enticing curve of her voluptuous body.

"You still find me attractive, Nicholas," she laughed with satisfaction.

Nick smothered the denial instantly. He'd never been drawn to her in any way, her arrogance and her self-serving obsessiveness made her repugnant to him. She imagined the entire world as her personal playground, and all existed to centre around her. Her preoccupation with herself had allowed her to survive the centuries but it had offered her little pleasure or security. Zoe embodied paranoia, and it made it impossible to truly care about her.

"LaCroix needs you," he stated without preamble. He wanted the meeting over with as quickly as possible.

Zoe's eyes narrowed with suspicion. Nick didn't waver, his blue eyes held hers candidly, no deceit in their sky-coloured depths.

"You'll have to do better than that, Nicholas."

He shrugged. "It's true. One of your . . ." He rethought his choice of words. "An acquaintance of yours has framed him for a death, and The Enforcers now hold him prisoner."

"That's absurd," she snapped impatiently.

"Is it?" he countered softly, his voice low with anger that was in no way feigned. "LaCroix is no more above The Code than we are, Zoe. Until someone comes forward with the truth, he has no way of escaping punishment."

"Why do you assume I can help him?" She laughed, bitterness and ice in her voice. "Why would you assume that I'd care what happened to him?"

This time it was Nick who laughed, and his tone was one of pure, ironic amusement.

"You change very little over the centuries, Zoe," he assured her. "LaCroix has always been your desired goal. Help him now and you may even win his favour." He added the last with just the correct amount of speculative thoughtfulness. "I understand how you feel, Zoe. He seduces us all, makes us care, and then forces us to lose that beneath hatred." He had her complete attention, and each word shook her indifference, replaced it with a hope that was, in truth, ridiculous. Still, Nick would not allow conscience to interfere with the only weakness he could conceivably exploit.

"You still love him," Nick went on. "We all do. It's part of us, no matter how hard we fight it. He owns each of us, it's the nature of his bonding. Search your heart, Zoe," he encouraged. "You know you don't want him to die, not if you can prevent it."

"How did you know to come to me?" she demanded, her resolve wavering with each second. "Why would I know what's been happening to him?"

Nick smiled, attempted warmth, it worked. "You always know, Zoe. It's one of the things that makes you so much like him." He watched the flattery work its spell, then he changed his expression again -- to one of anxiousness and pleading. "I'm not the only one who knows about this place, Zoe," he warned her quietly. "But if you leave with me, it will make their coming unnecessary."

She didn't miss the implication.

"Who?"

"Stavros," Nick answered, injecting a small amount of dread into his tone.

She shook visibly.

"Is he still loyal to LaCroix?" she asked, needlessly. She already knew that answer, of course, but it was imperative that Nicholas not understand that it was she, not Evann, who was truly guilty of the crime of which LaCroix had been accused. Marc had tried to stop her from taking Gabrielle from the estate, the impudent young fool. He'd actually gone so far as to threaten to expose her to LaCroix.

"He's impatient to have this cleared up," Knight replied, his tone neutral. "I doubt LaCroix is an amiable captive."

"I need time to think, Nicholas," she said, her eyes imploring him to understand, and submit to her request.

It was what he had anticipated, and the entreaty assured him that he had won her cooperation, and more importantly, her trust.

"Dawn is only a couple of hours away," he said, as if making a decision. "I'll return tomorrow night, and we'll go together."

"Are you sure I can't persuade you to stay with me?" Zoe asked, her lips curved into a seductive smile.

"I'm tempted," Nick lied, "but, no."

"Janette?"

He smiled, then nodded the agreement she clearly expected.

Zoe watched him leave, relieved, yet disappointed as well.

* * *

It took less than an hour to locate Evann, and dismiss the insipid girl he'd been passing the night with. Zoe glared at him when he came into the study of his new residence, belting a loose robe around his thin body.

"You wanted something, Zoe?" he asked as he walked to the bar and casually poured two glasses. He crossed the room and handed one of the crystal goblets to her before he sat on the edge of the desk.

"I want you to destroy Gabrielle," she told him quietly. "The Enforcers have taken LaCroix into custody for Marc's death, and Nicholas has requested that I save his master." She delighted in the irony, and grinned at her young lover.

"He's your master, too, Zoe," the enigmatic vampire pointed out, his tone devoid of any inflection that would reveal his feelings about her present mood. "And," he added darkly, "LaCroix didn't kill Marc, did he?"

"Does it matter, Evann?"

He hesitated, then shrugged with a nonchalance he wasn't feeling.

"LaCroix is going to die, my darling," she smirked. "And his bitch can die knowing that he left her to your mercy."

"Is that enough for you, Zoe?"

She laughed. "Yes, it is."

Evann didn't believe her.

"Where is she?"

"The castle."

"When?"

"Tomorrow night will be soon enough."

He snorted, then finished the blood in his glass. "Tomorrow will have to do, my love," he noted. "Since the sun is less than an hour away."

Zoe slithered from her chair and walked into his embrace. She set aside the glass she had drained, and looped her arms around his neck.

"Why don't we celebrate our victory?" she purred into his ear, and laughed provocatively when Evann's arms pulled her into closer contact with his body.

* * *

"You seem anxious to get this over with," Nick observed, mildly surprised to find Zoe standing outside his loft, waiting for him.

"I saw no reason for you to come for me, Nicholas," she smiled.

Ignoring the retort he wanted to toss at her, Nick nodded and gestured toward the Caddy.

"You are serious?" Zoe realised a moment later when he walked to the car and waited.

"It's a pleasant way to travel," he remarked with a casual smile.

* * *

"Evann, you can't!"

He sighed heavily and took Iris by the arm as they headed out the door of his mansion.

"Go to The Raven," he directed softly, persuasively. "I need to know what she says to the conclave. It's the best help you can offer me, dearest."

"She's going to protect him, Evann -- not you!" Her voice rose with the resounding shrill of hysteria.

"And you will protect me, Iris," he explained patiently. He tried to sound as certain as he wanted her to feel, and knew he was only partially successful when her hazel eyes filled with tears. "You must be prepared to warn me, swiftly, if you are right. Do you understand? I am trusting you with my life, Iris, because I know you won't betray me."

As he'd expected, the appeal melted away the last of her resistance. He would have laughed in her face if he hadn't needed her support so desperately. She wasn't devious by nature, yet she had undoubtedly made the correct assessment of Zoe's intent at the trial-like gathering scheduled tonight.

Evann kissed her deeply, enjoyed the sweet innocence of her response for several minutes, then he broke away from her.

"Be my eyes, love," he said softly, then disappeared into the night.

Iris stared after him, her heart heavy, then she straightened her slim shoulders and headed for The Raven.

* * *

"She's blaming Evann for everything," Janette hissed in barely suppressed fury. The assembled vampire community filled the club, which was closed for a 'Private Party'. Zoe was speaking to the legion of Enforcers, her pleas of honesty and honour eloquent and seemingly heartfelt.

"We knew she would," Nicholas replied in an undertone. He had watched LaCroix during Zoe's discourse, and the tremors of rage than emanated from the ancient vampire were growing more savage with each moment.

"He's going to destroy her for this," Janette stated firmly.

"I'm leaving," Nick told her. "Do your best to keep him -- " he stopped speaking and smiled ruefully. "Do your best, Janette. I'm going to find Evann, and Gabrielle."

Before she could wish him luck, he'd slipped away.

Unobtrusively, she managed to catch LaCroix's eye and nodded imperceptibly. His only acknowledgement was the flicker of a smile that turned one corner of his mouth upward momentarily.

* * *

Gabrielle drank the blood that Evann offered, her hunger had driven her far past the point of caring who it was that supplied the life-giving liquid. The blood returned some measure of awareness, and as pain flooded her body, she almost regretted his generosity. The numbness had enabled her to forget how badly injured she truly was after Zoe's tortures.

Evann's voice, gentle and melodic, penetrated her dulled senses and she shuddered in instinctive revulsion when his hand stroked the tangle of her hair. He meant for her to find the touch comforting, she knew it was anything but that.

"You should have given me a chance to help you, Gabrielle," he murmured, and brushed aside the heavy curtain of her hair so he could see her face more clearly.

She stared at him, mute, her grey eyes dead and flat.

"You don't have to die," he whispered, sincerely amused and enjoying her helplessness.

"LaCroix won't be coming for you, Gabrielle," he said with false regret. "In fact, he's probably been executed by now."

Gabrielle's mind recoiled instantly, shocked into a cry of denial that rushed from her lips before she could consciously prevent it.

"You lie!"

Evann nodded, his expression changed to grim satisfaction.

"So, you still have a voice after all."

"Liar," she repeated, her mind frantically searched for some trace of LaCroix, despite her instinctive knowledge that she wouldn't be able to reach him, regardless of the situation.

"Search all you wish, Gabrielle," Evann encouraged. "He's gone." He smiled, and eased her into a sitting position. He held her with appalling gentleness, cushioned her back against his chest as he settled more comfortably, the stone wall bracing his body as he did hers.

"I can help you," he crooned. "All you have to do is ask."

Gabrielle wrenched away from him, and succeeded in falling face first into the filth that covered the floor. She groaned in agony, and closed her eyes. The wounds that ran the length of her legs began to spill the precious blood he'd given her, and she felt sickened by the weakness that assailed her with renewed vigour.

Evann watched her as she tried to crawl. She was barely able to move a few inches before collapsing again, her hands knotted futilely into fists. The frustration and terror that poured from her mind was almost a visible entity in the small room. She had no fear of her own death, it was the possibility that LaCroix no longer lived that truly terrified her. Beneath the fright, Evann could feel her rage unfurling.

"Ask me to help you?" he laughed softly.

Gabrielle gathered her last reserves of strength, and she turned to look at him. He was a handsome man, one easily suited to vampiric existence. He enjoyed what he was, and exulted in the power it gave him. She might have admired him under different circumstances. A smile played about her lips, and she let her head rest on the stone floor as if it were a feathered pillow.

"Evann," she whispered, her voice alien to her own ears with its rough rasp. "You may be many things, but you could never be Lucien. Not to me, and not to her."

The smugness of her tone infuriated him, and he moved with the swiftness of a striking jackal. Evann hauled her to her feet and slammed her into the wall, he ignored the resounding crack of her skull striking stone, just as he disregarded the vacancy within her eyes.

"I can make you forget he existed, Gabrielle," he told her with an obscene smile. She didn't respond, and the lack of concern further enraged him.

Evann eased away from her, but his hands continued to pin her to the wall. It was the only thing that kept her standing. His look swept over her, lewd and assessing. Zoe had ruined her for the moment, but it would only take a few weeks to restore some of the lost beauty that made her so appealing. Still, he was sure there could be some amusement found even in her present condition.

His hands moved from her shoulders to her breasts, and she jerked in a tiny rejection of his touch. Her hands rose and encircled his wrists, but there was no real strength in the grasp she attempted. He laughed and bent his head to her neck, his tongue seeking the scars that branded her LaCroix's lover. He found the rough edged puncture marks and as he prepared to pierce her throat, his fingers slid between her thighs.

"NO . . . "

* * *

Nick heard the sob of denial, the resonances of humiliation and degradation that reverberated in the low cry. The last few steps disappeared beneath his feet as he flew to the

room where she'd been held.

The screaming snarl of ruthless anger that warned Evann of his presence came an instant too late. Nicholas grabbed the other man and hurled him into the wall as Gabrielle slithered to the floor, unconscious. He had no time to look at her before Evann had shaken off the daze of shock and launched at him, fangs bared and eyes gleaming.

Nick caught the weight of his attacker and rolled, allowing Evann to take him to the floor, then he flung the other vampire over his head. He regained his stance in a smooth flow of uninterrupted movement, the action vaguely dance-like in its grace and precision. He dared a glance at LaCroix's lady, and fear increased his already rapid heartbeat. She appeared dead.

Evann took advantage of the momentary distraction, and he wrenched loose one of the chains that had been put into place to hold Gabrielle. It hadn't been necessary to shackle her, by the time she'd been brought to Zoe's castle she hadn't enough strength left to pose a threat to anyone. He swung the length of steel and laughed wildly when it ensnared Nick.

Knight's hands tore at the heavy noose of chain about his neck, and he was forced to stumble toward Evann when the other yanked brutally. He permitted himself to fall, the motion took him down and the sudden shift in weight threw Evann of balance as well. As he leaned forward with the pull of the chain, Nick's hands rose, fingers laced together to form a single fist. He caught Evann beneath the chin, the blow powered by the combined fear and disgust that writhed inside him.

Nick heard the sharp crack of dislocating bones, and he jerked forward involuntarily when the impact of his action sent Evann flailing into the wall again. The younger vampire groaned quietly, his head lolling at an impossible angle, then he slid down the wall into an ungainly heap on the floor. Knight shook off the swirl of blood lust and violence that clouded his mind, and he rose slowly. When his limbs were steadied, he walked to Gabrielle and bent to gather her into his arms.

"Gabrielle?"

"LaCroix?"

The name was barely audible, and Nick wondered if it had been spoken out loud at all when he stared down into her lifeless features. He was revolted by the ravages of pain and torment that obscured her loveliness. There was no part of her that hadn't been violated in some way. LaCroix would never be appeased by the deaths of Evann and Zoe, not for this defilement of the woman he loved.

"I'll take you to him," Nick promised, uncertain if she could hear, let alone understand him. He took her up to the main level of the house, sat her in the elegant study he'd shared with Zoe the previous night, and quickly wrapped her in his long coat. She didn't respond visibly to his presence.

Reluctantly, Nick left her alone, and headed back to the basement. He had one final thing to do before they left the castle.

* * *

Evann stirred as consciousness slowly returned. Pain rippled through his body, and he

tried to turn away from it, to banish it into the darkness again. He couldn't move. Panic seized him and his eyes flew open.

Nick stood over him, Gabrielle nestled against his chest, lifeless. Knight's expression was one of total loathing. Evann felt greater fear wake inside him when Nick spoke.

"Dawn is an hour away," Knight told the other man. "If you can escape, make sure LaCroix never finds out about it."

"You can't do this to me, Knight!" Evann pleaded. He tore at the chains that bound him, full awareness only now reaching his rejecting mind. Nick had driven stakes into the hard ground of the courtyard, and the lengths of chain that had been meant for Gabrielle now held Evann captive. He was naked, limbs pulled into a spread-eagle, and he wasn't able to break free. The stakes Knight had chosen had been the crosses that had kept Gabrielle powerless and at their mercy for so long. He didn't question how Nick had managed to accomplish his punishment, assumed it was the knight's rage and courage that made the impossible possible.

"I have, Evann," Nick replied with a slow smile. "If you die, it won't be at my hand. This is more chance than you gave LaCroix, or Gabrielle."

Evann's shrieks of terror echoed in the night long after Nick had left him.

* * *

LaCroix stared at the ebony haired woman who stood before him, her hands raised in supplication. His expression remained unchanged, the ice in his sapphire eyes no less chilling as she offered herself to him without words.

"You are pathetic," he whispered after eternal minutes passed in utter silence. He felt the rumbles of unease ripple through the assembled vampires who watched the exchange.

"What?" It was a stunned gasp of disbelief. Zoe blinked once, then her hands fell to her sides.

"Did you really believe that taking her from me would make me forget?" Once again, his tone was colder than an arctic draught. "I would rather spend another two hundred years searching for her than a single night in your company, Zoe. After so many centuries, how can you not understand?" LaCroix smiled, and the shift of features revealed even greater contempt than the soft, seductive purr of his voice. "Gabrielle is my soul, as I am hers. You were a mistake, woman. A mistake that has cost me more than I would ever have known possible."

"She's weak, Lucien. She is also dead. Truly dead." Zoe's voice was almost as breathy as LaCroix's had been, but venom seeped into her husky tones.

"Gabrielle has died before, Zoe," he assured the other vampire. "Your jealousy cannot destroy her, nor can your lies. You have sealed your Fate, and I assure you, it will not be one shared with me. Gabrielle will never leave me."

"She has!"

"Not yet, Zoe," a new voice answered.

LaCroix turned at Nicholas's decree and his heart rose in his throat when he saw the battered redhead the former knight cradled to his chest. Without further words, Nicholas walked across the room and placed Gabrielle's unconscious body into LaCroix's arms. His heart ached

when he read the abject misery in his master's face as LaCroix's gaze caressed his lover's lifeless features. His pain was tangible, as was his rage.

Janette slipped from her watchful place among the crowd and came to stand at Nick's side. They blocked the way to anyone who would attempt to follow LaCroix as the master vampire took his lover from the room. Their united stance spoke eloquently of their reinforced loyalty to their immortal father.

"I'll have you killed for this betrayal, Nicholas," Zoe murmured.

"As you would have destroyed Gabrielle?" Janette snapped in unconcealed fury. "You have no right, Zoe. She is LaCroix's, as we are."

"As I am, also, young one," the older vampire hissed.

"LaCroix denies you," Nicholas interjected. "He concedes he made you, but he does not claim you."

"I am Lucien's greatest achievement, children," she smiled.

Nick smiled, and the expression bore the distinct air of LaCroix's disdain as he looked down at the deranged woman.

The Conclave stirred again, and all eyes were drawn to the legion of Enforcers who had witnessed the events.

"He has yet to face judgement," Stavros spoke softly, his eyes locked with Nick's wary gaze.

"He will not return here willingly," Janette said quietly. "Not without her."

"She deserves the chance to speak," Nicholas continued. "It is her right. Gabrielle has been the truest victim of Zoe's obsessive madness."

* * *

When she would have fled, the Enforcers closed rank and Zoe was restrained. The decision of the Conclave was not long in coming, but they stayed their verdict until LaCroix could again be located, and both he and his lover given opportunity to address the group themselves.

* * *

Iris vanished in the confusion, she had to warn Evann.
If Evann was still alive.

* * *

LaCroix rarely left her in the weeks that followed. His children knew nothing of the small log cabin located several miles outside Toronto. He had trusted only one man with that secret, and it was Stavros who supplied him with the precious blood they needed, and kept LaCroix apprised of what went on in his absence.

Gabrielle's injuries had been extensive. Even now LaCroix found it difficult to touch

her without wanting Zoe's blood as retribution for the agonies his beloved had suffered. He talked to her, held her through nightmares that never seemed to end, and guarded her life with his.

As she had done for him throughout many long months, LaCroix fed his lover from his own veins, and willed her survival, because he would accept nothing else.

* * *

"What have you decided?" LaCroix questioned when he reached the foot of the stairs that led from the loft-style bedroom that filled the entire second level of the cabin.

"Evann's death was a direct result of Nick's actions," Stavros replied, dark eyes serious, but unmistakably tired. "Under the circumstances, there isn't a single person who stands against him for that judgement."

"Iris?"

"No one who would matter," Stavros corrected with a shrug. "She has cleared you of blame in Marc's death." He made the announcement casually, both men fully aware of how little it mattered at this stage.

"Zoe?"

"She used Evann, and he used others," Stavros said quietly. "They weren't after the same thing, Lucien."

"I should think not," LaCroix commented dryly. "She's mad, of course, and I was a fool not to destroy her centuries ago."

"You were a fool not to accept responsibility for her," Stavros corrected. He dared what few others would with the observation, and LaCroix conceded with a curt nod.

"They want to hear Gabrielle's testimony, LaCroix."

The master vampire straightened slightly, and anger flared in his brilliant blue eyes. Stavros held his gaze, unaffected by the powerful presence, and the lethal rage that emanated from the other ancient. It was several long minutes later before LaCroix nodded, then dismissed the Enforcer with a gesture.

* * *

"It's been months, Janette," Nick whispered. "It's as if they've vanished."

"They haven't," she assured him.

Knight smiled and pulled her a little closer, his heart comforted by the pleasant feel of her next to him.

"She'll live, won't she?"

Janette brought one of his hands to her lips and kissed the open palm. "If she doesn't, we'll all pay the price, Nickola."

"LaCroix won't allow her to die," Nick said softly. "I can't get his face out of my mind, the way he looked at her when I gave her back to him. I didn't think he was capable of that kind of love, Janette."

She pulled back enough to look him squarely in the eyes.

"Is that why you kept your sister from him, mon amour?" she asked, her huge blue eyes sharp and insistent.

"I think that was part of it," he admitted hesitantly.

"And now you are wondering where we stand once again?" she concluded after several moments contemplation.

"I've done things that I would never have believed I'd do for him again," Nick responded. "And I've felt things that I was certain I'd buried forever."

"LaCroix is part of us, Nickola," she stated firmly. "In his way, he loves us, and we him. If that wasn't true, he wouldn't be able to demand our loyalty."

"I can't go back."

"He doesn't ask that you do, mon chér," she laughed quietly. "He wants your understanding, and your acceptance. It's always been about acceptance, Nick. You rejected him, and LaCroix will not tolerate rejection."

"Was it LaCroix I rejected, though?" Nick posed the query with a smile. "I can't be like him. He has to accept that."

She grinned. "And there you have the heart of your problem," she decreed.

"How do you feel about him?"

"Love and hate," she replied instantly, with a shrug of her slender shoulders. "Just as I always have. That which binds us has never been simple, Nickola, as you well know. And we are all bound, to LaCroix, in some fashion."

"Gabrielle?"

"I don't know," Janette confessed. "She's equal parts madness and charm. She adores LaCroix, that makes her a dangerous friend, and an even more dangerous enemy."

"He loves her."

"He does at that."

"Janette?"

She heard the nuances in his tone, the uncertainty, and the warmth that had been gone for much too long.

"I know, Nickola," she offered, "I've always known."

Nick drew her closer and shivered as her mouth opened to his and the love of lifetimes wrapped them in a cloak of well-known passion.

* * *

"Lucien?"

LaCroix looked up from the book he'd been reading and the smile that lit his features dazzled her. He set the volume on the low coffeetable in front of him, rose, and went to meet her at the foot of the steps.

"How do you feel?"

"Much better, bien-aimé," she assured him and stepped into his embrace gratefully. "How long has it been?"

The thread of fear in her voice tweaked at the old fury, but he quelled it quickly.

"Months, pet," he answered and led her to the sofa in front of the fireplace.

"You've been here with me all this time?" She tried not to sound disbelieving, but the emotion was quite obvious, even to her.

"Where else would I be?" he countered, his voice cool.

"They told me you had been executed," she informed him, and her voice shook with the remembered terror. "I wanted to die, LaCroix."

"I may yet destroy all who hurt you, Gabrielle," he said, eyes flashing dangerously.

"No," she dismissed the idea immediately. "I simply want it to be forgotten, Lucien."

"I will never forget, ma bien-aimé," he hissed savagely.

"Things must change," she said half-heartedly, her guileless helplessness evident in the tone of her voice. She suddenly averted her eyes from his shrewd gaze.

"What must change, Gabrielle?" he demanded harshly.

"We must change, my love," she answered after a brief pause. "What we do to each other, and what we ask of each other. If we continue as we were, we'll end up destroying each other. I can't live within madness, LaCroix. I know that now. I haven't the strength any longer."

He heard the words she didn't speak, as well. She was terrified of her own memories, and the deaths she'd caused. They had been few, but they haunted her nonetheless. She'd accepted degradation and abuse from him, because she wanted his love. She had defied The Code, risked reprisal from the Enforcers, and had challenged the very gods for his life. He felt her weariness, and knew. She truly couldn't endure more, even for love of him. She would die the next time, though god himself would never stop LaCroix if there was to be a next time. Her fears were complex, twisted inside her, beyond her reach and ability to define. Recovery would be slow, and she would need his love, not his domination.

"Change has already occurred, Gabrielle," he told her gently. "I will not allow anyone to hurt you again, my pet."

She turned her face up to his and shuddered violently when his lips covered hers for the first time in many months. Her body, still scarred, though healing, stirred with desires and aches of a kind she had almost forgotten. His hands explored cautiously, the caresses tender yet sensual. She pressed closer to him, her body pliant to his growing urgency. Her robe fell open at his touch, and she moaned quietly when his fingertips teased her breasts, toyed with the sensitive nipples until she twisted to face him and guided his mouth to one erect point.

LaCroix sucked gently, lavished erotic attention on both responsive breasts before he moved to her throat. Her hips pushed into him, the motion restless and hungry, and LaCroix's hand slowly slid between her thighs. Long fingers slipped into her wetness and he opened his mouth, fangs extended, eager to taste the blood he'd craved for far too long. He was totally unprepared for the sudden tension that made her go rigid in his arms.

"No, LaCroix, please don't!" she gasped, tears making her voice rough with terror. "I can't!"

He forcibly resisted the urge to ignore her. Once he would have done so without conscience. He looked into her eyes and read inexplicable horror in the smoke-coloured depths.

The sleepy haze of desire was gone without a trace, and all that remained was revulsion and fear. He withdrew his touch and she tried to leave him, almost fell onto the floor in her anxiousness to escape him. He released her completely, and she did run.

Hours later he found her huddled into their bed, shaking and crying softly. He climbed in beside her, drew her into his arms, and held her as she cried for what was left of the night.

* * *

Several more weeks passed before LaCroix raised the subject of her facing the community that awaited her telling of all that she'd been through at Zoe's hands.

"Why do they wish to know?" she questioned, alarm in her wide eyes. "I can't, LaCroix. I don't want to remember, I want to forget!" She was terrified of many things now, not the least of which was her continued inability to be his lover again. Had Zoe won after all? The thought repelled and enraged her.

LaCroix had read the shifts of mood and thought, he read her effortlessly now, and was disturbed that she didn't seem aware that he did so.

"For it to end, we must speak, *ma bien-aimé*," he answered, his voice soothing, filled with love and strength.

"I'm afraid, Lucien," she confessed. "I feel like I'll never again **not** be afraid."

LaCroix opened his arms to her, and held her tightly when she stepped into his embrace.

"I will be with you, Gabrielle."

It took a long time, but eventually she agreed to the meeting.

* * *

"You are a complete fool, Lucien," Zoe snarled as the master vampire held the trembling redhead in his arms and soothed her with gentle caresses and soft words. Her testimony had been shattering, no one present had remained completely unaffected. Only Zoe. But, as the mastermind of the torture, she knew it as intimately as Gabrielle herself, moreso perhaps because Zoe had lived longer with the insanity that spawned it.

For a long time she was ignored, as the entire room awaited the outcome of the bizarre drama. Eventually, Gabrielle eased away from LaCroix's embrace and very slowly turned to face Zoe. She crossed the hushed chamber, pausing only long enough to pick up the sharpened ash stake that had been placed on the table in the centre of the room. Notably, none moved to stop her. When she faced the other woman, Gabrielle simply stared at her.

"You are as much a fool as the bastard you adore," Zoe remarked with studied nonchalance.

"Perhaps," Gabrielle acquiesced, her full lips curved into a loving smile. "But, it is I, not you, who will know eternity in his arms, Zoe. And that is what eats away at you, isn't it? To think of his entire being entwined with someone other than you, to know that he loves me, that he **needs** me."

"Lucien needs no one, bitch," Zoe snapped. "If you knew him at all, you would know

that!"

"He does not need you," Gabrielle corrected. "Nor do we," she went on with a slight gesture that managed to encompass the entire gathering of vampires. "Your kind is our greatest danger."

"So you propose to destroy me?" Zoe laughed. "There's not enough hate in you," she decided after a lengthy pause in which she measured Gabrielle's intent.

"You may be right," the lovely psychic acknowledged for the second time in minutes. She turned her back and would have stepped away. Zoe's laughter echoed in the room, and the victory she felt lit the air like bright sparks of candleflame. Gabrielle looked directly at LaCroix, their gazes locked intensely for a moment, then he nodded imperceptibly.

"But, when it comes to LaCroix, there is more than enough love to end your miserable existence," Gabrielle stated as though the flow of her words had never been interrupted.

The stake, pointed toward the floor seconds before, twirled like a baton, and, as she spun around, Gabrielle buried the long ash stave into Zoe's chest. Her momentum carried her and she rammed the death-rod deeper as she pushed the screaming vampire into the nearest wall.

Zoe writhed in abject terror as agony flooded her body with fire and ice. Her vision clouded red and she shrieked LaCroix's name as she felt true death reach for her. LaCroix's mind invaded hers in those last seconds, and she knew beyond doubt that he despised her with a passion that equalled his love for the beautiful auburn haired woman she had nearly taken from him. He loathed her, and he laughed at her anguish as he had suffered with Gabrielle's pain. Another voice penetrated the growing void of her mind, and she shuddered as Gabrielle's physical assault was amplified by a mental attack that flung Zoe into an abyss of darkness that would never relent.

* * *

LaCroix caught her as she collapsed. Gabrielle cried softly and curled closer to him, her face against his neck. He felt the wetness of tears touch his skin, and he kissed her temple.

"It's over, pet," he assured her.

The combined murmurs of the others drew his attention from the woman in his arms. His eyes glowed dangerously.

"It is over," he repeated softly.

He didn't wait for a response to his decree and walked away. He continued through the bar, and out into the night, away from The Raven, and the threat of a blood lust that wanted to run rampant against all of those who had helped Zoe and Evann. He would decide their fate at another time. Now, he had a life to rebuild.

* * *

"Why?"

Janette was genuinely startled by the sincere alarm in Gabrielle's tone and expression as the other woman's hand touched her arm.

"It's time," Janette replied softly. "LaCroix understands that."

"I don't, Janette," Gabrielle said. "We've finally learned to be friends, and now you propose to leave Toronto. I don't want you to go."

Janette felt oddly touched by the simplicity of the admission. It was almost child-like, and not the type of statement that the raven-haired beauty would ever have expected to hear from LaCroix's lover. The master vampire continued to worry about Gabrielle, and the nightmares that haunted the other woman had not relented. He would not, of course, tell her more than that, but Janette suspected that Zoe's death figured prominently in Gabrielle's torment.

"No one blames you, Gabrielle," Janette ventured carefully.

The auburn haired psychic tilted her head to one side and the raised eyebrow Janette's words incited was the mirror image of LaCroix's ironic amusement.

"I blame myself," she answered, her tone equal to her expression. "I knew she wanted Lucien, that she was using Evann, and he was as blind to her motives as I have often been to LaCroix's. Love does that to some of us, though, doesn't it?"

It was Janette's turn to smile with the irony of the observation, and she inclined her head in acquiescence.

"Evann may have been a fool, but I think he had some genuine support for the ideals he professed. Those that do not accept his role in Zoe's schemes will want to continue what they see as his work. He wanted LaCroix rejected. If this idiotic concept gains any support among Evann's faithful, then we have merely avoided a major conflict, not defeated it."

Janette sighed, and her answer, had she been prepared to offer one, was diverted by LaCroix's arrival. He handed her an envelope and smiled.

"The sale is complete, Janette," he told her and kissed Gabrielle's temple while he slid an arm around her waist. "The Raven is now under new management."

"What about the radio station?" Gabrielle interjected.

"The show will broadcast from the back room, and you will run the station for me," he announced with a smile.

"I will?"

"You've got a brilliant head for business, pet," he explained patiently. "You've proved it several times in successful companies. I am simply taking advantage of your not so obvious talents," he laughed, his expression warm and seductive.

Gabrielle smiled, but the shift of features lacked the careless ease with which she would once have accepted his subtle insinuation.

Janette picked up the papers and looked deeply into LaCroix's sapphire eyes. A world of things seemed to need expressing, yet no words were adequate. She was surprised when he stepped away from Gabrielle then gently enfolded her in a friendly embrace. He kissed her forehead, held her a moment longer, then let her go.

Gabrielle stared at her, grey eyes filmed with crimson tears.

"I shall miss you, Janette," she whispered thickly.

Janette impulsively hugged the redhead, then left them quickly, before her own emotions could betray her sudden, and unexpected sadness. She had already spoken privately with LaCroix and knew that he would tell Nicholas not to search for her.

* * *

Several weeks later ---

LaCroix woke slowly as the first hint of dusk began to fade the day-blue sky. He smiled sleepily and pulled Gabrielle closer. Her soft contours, already cushioned to his body, pressed more intimately against him. The smooth curve of her back and buttocks moulded to him and one of his hands glided over her stomach and cupped a full breast, caressing sensuously. Her nipple hardened instantly and LaCroix's body responded vividly to the soft sigh she uttered. She was still deep in sleep, and he knew if he woke her, she would merely turn in his arms and ask him to hold her. It had been months since her abduction, and he wanted to make love to her, not hold her as he would a child. He wanted his mistress back, in all her passionate and lusting glory.

He carefully eased away from her and she murmured dreamily as she shifted fully onto her back. LaCroix stared down at her softened features, the enticing fullness of her lips, parted slightly, inviting the hungry probe of his tongue. He permitted himself that pleasure, and covered her mouth with an erotic kiss. He tasted her familiar sweetness, sucked her tongue deep into his mouth and felt the welcome rush of her instinctive response. Her fangs had emerged and she bit into his tongue. Blood seeped from their locked mouths and LaCroix groaned as she woke and started to pull away from him.

Disoriented, Gabrielle twisted free of the suffocating kiss that had lit fire in her veins. Her entire body was vibrating with need and passion, begging for satiation. She opened her eyes and was instantly caught in the overwhelming wash of blue that burned back at her from LaCroix's stare. Her heart thudded erratically as the azure beauty mutated into searing golden flame. She knew in that instant that he would not be denied fulfilment of his hunger this time, despite her irrational fears. His fangs filled her vision and the scent of his blood made her writhe beneath him. His weight shifted, and she was trapped more securely under him, her limbs tangled with his as she squirmed.

"No, LaCroix . . . Please, non, mon amour!" she gasped. Another, deeper part of her mind wanted him to ignore her fright, to banish it for both of them. Would he understand something she didn't comprehend herself?

LaCroix's hands moved to her hips, wrenched them up to meet his thrust as he buried himself inside her. He shuddered violently as the sweet, familiar tight velvet heat of her body accepted him, sheathed him in slick, voracious folds of warmth. Her hands clutched at him and he started to pull them away, then realised that she was moving with him, her hips matching the frenzied rhythm of his lust. She pulled his mouth down to hers again, and he slowed the motion of his body.

Gabrielle broke the kiss and arched beneath him, offered her throat to his possession, as well as her body. She spasmed again as he eased free of her with agonising slowness.

"Please, Lucien . . . " she stammered. "Don't!"

"Don't what, my pet?" he breathed into her ear.

"Not now," she pleaded. "Don't tease me." Each word was dragged from that part of her that had never belonged to any man other than him, and was genuinely beyond her control in his arms. "I do want you, mon bien-aimé." Her mind opened to his, permitted him to feel her fright and her struggle to overcome it. Every part of her was alive and attuned to his touch, even as she accepted her fear of disappointing him. Or, her truest fear, that now that he had her back, and knew all that had been done to her, he would discover he no longer wanted her.

LaCroix heard all the words she wouldn't speak. His powerful mind sent messages of love and reassurance even as his body moved against her in erotic, rhythmic precision. He'd wanted few women as he did Gabrielle, loved fewer still -- none had ever belonged to him as completely as the lover who was now locked in his embrace. Closer to the surface of her thoughts, more easily read was the language of sex that always hovered on the edges of her tongue but would never escape her -- even in the throes of her passion for him. He poured his heart into her mind as his fangs sank into soft, yielding flesh and he gave her the near-savage possession she needed while he consumed her blood and her love.

When her body found release, she screamed and her legs wrapped around his waist and held him encased in her convulsing heat. LaCroix raised his head and swallowed his own cry of pleasure as she tore into his throat and his climax hit him with euphoric intensity. He filled her with his essence, and his mind caressed hers in waves of contentment and happiness. She drew back from his throat and stared up at him, golden fire slowly replaced by the darker shades of smoke. LaCroix didn't move off of her, he bent to place a light kiss on her lips, lingered over the softness of her mouth.

"I love you," she whispered, her hands running the length of his back in massaging strokes.

LaCroix's smile was indulgent but lacked his customary arrogance. He brushed her forehead with his lips then met her glowing gaze again. "I do love you, pet," he told her quietly.

She closed her eyes and dragged in a shaking breath. "I have waited so long for that gift, Lucien. Yet somehow I've always known it was mine."

He laughed, the sound low, provocative, then he nodded. "But you did wait, Gabrielle."

"I would never take from you what you were not ready to give, LaCroix," she said seriously.

"You took my heart long before I wanted to relinquish it," he smiled.

"Shall I apologise for my thievery, Master?" she grinned, her eyes suddenly alive with mischief.

"Never," he answered, then blue eyes grew dark and dangerous. "But do not think for a single instant that you will ever again turn your back on me, pet."

"I belong to you, Lucien," she replied with equal vehemence. "I will always belong to you. That is the only truth I will ever need. You drove me away once, mon bien-aimé. You will not do so again, I promise."

LaCroix accepted her words, then nodded. He leaned closer and his mouth sought her neck. The taste of her blood filled his senses and the sensuous shift of her body beneath him quickly reawakened another hunger.

* * *

Gabrielle pulled into a parking space in front of the busy nightclub. The small, sporty looking vehicle drew almost as much attention as the lady herself as she climbed out of the bright red Probe, the slit in her russet-coloured velvet skirt revealing an appealing expanse of shapely leg. Gabrielle was immune to the notice she attracted, her eyes focused intently on the etched lettering above the door -- The Raven. Except it wasn't really The Raven anymore, not as it had been less than a month ago.

She was stunned at the painful pang of loneliness she felt as she stared at the reminder of Janette. The beautiful vampire had never been overly happy to have Gabrielle around, but somewhere along the way, they'd learned to care about each other in spite of themselves.

Working at the main studio of CERK Radio had distracted the auburn haired psychic, but she missed LaCroix's company during his shows. Listening to his voice pour from the speakers was hardly compensation for his absence, and the distinct strangeness of being separated from him within the same city. She bent to pick up the envelope she'd been asked to deliver, ignored the whistles her action prompted, then slammed the car door.

LaCroix had laughed at her for buying the car, but she was rediscovering the pleasure of driving. She'd enjoyed long, solitary drives as a mortal, and found they were just as therapeutic to troubled vampires. Squaring her shoulders, she headed for the entrance to the club.

* * *

Gabrielle felt a flare of anger arc through her as she strode into the vast main room of The Raven. She hadn't been in the place since LaCroix had bought it, and the club no longer bore even slight resemblance to the elite, atmospheric nightclub Janette had taken such pride in. Gabrielle hated what had been done to her friend's business.

Friend? she pondered, startled by the vehemence of her disdain of the people who swarmed within the place. Yes, she conceded with a wry smile, Janette was her friend. They had found common bonds and a genuine respect for each other in recent times of adversity.

The envelope she carried slipped to the floor when one of the more outlandishly garbed men in the club bumped into the beautiful redhead. Gabrielle resisted the urge to snarl, and tried to believe it could have been an accident. When she bent to retrieve the packet, and he moved with her, she felt the smooth stroke of a hand glide the length of her spine and curve around her backside.

She picked up the fallen envelope and rose gracefully. Her smile was icy when she turned to face the man who had risked much in that careless moment, much more than he realised. He grinned at her, amused and expectant. Gabrielle's smile grew wider, and chillier. She reached out and in a blur of motion flung the young man across the room and into the stage. Dancers and strippers cleared the area instantly, and the crash, combined with the screech of feedback from the sound system, slowly hushed the room.

"If any of you ever dare to touch me again," Gabrielle purred in a lethal whisper that was

clearly heard. "I promise you will all suffer for the affront."

"And who might you be to make that kind of threat?" a bold voice enquired.

Gabrielle sighted the youth and again her smile was death itself.

"I am Gabrielle, boy," she answered softly. "And should you wish to go on living," she let her glance encompass the whole room before she continued, "should all of you wish to see another night, you will never again touch me without permission. Am I making myself clear?"

"Exceedingly, pet."

Gabrielle's smile thawed minutely. She waited for LaCroix to come fully into the room, her heartbeat grew more rapid with his every step closer. When he was only a few feet from her, one of the women present stepped up to him and her hand rose.

"There are two things you must remember if you expect to remain alive and well," Gabrielle went on, as though she had not been interrupted at all. She had moved, again with vampiric speed, and now held the girl's wrist in her grasp. She tightened her grip, heard the audible snap of bones, and tossed the screaming girl aside without a glance. "The first rule of survival is that I will not be disobeyed, by any of you. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, you will never set hands on what is mine."

LaCroix laughed, sincerely amused.

"I'm flattered, my pet."

"You should be," she replied with a fleeting smile.

The girl with the broken wrist had been helped to her feet and she glared at the lovely redhead for several moments before she once again stepped forward.

"Do you know who he is?" the girl hissed, her voice hoarse with pain and shaky with shock.

Gabrielle's eyebrow rose, and she deigned to look at the girl another time.

"He is my master, child, and you'd do well to stay away from us both. Make no mistake, LaCroix belongs to me as I do him."

The girl turned pleading eyes to the fair haired man, and trembled visibly when his eyes remained fixed on the enraged beauty before him. His pleasure was almost tangible.

"The Night Crawler is master to us all," a male voice called out from the crowd, "and slave to none!"

Gabrielle's delighted laughter silenced the cheer that had begun at the bold declaration.

"Your fan mail, mon bien-aimé," she said and tossed the packet to LaCroix. He caught it deftly and dropped it on the bar. "Some of it is almost as lurid as your new clientele."

When she would have walked out, LaCroix's voice halted her exit.

"I want to talk to you, pet," he told her when she faced him again.

"I will destroy the next fool who touches me, Lucien," she assured him. "They make my skin crawl!"

He shrugged, impervious to the semi-naked bodies that surrounded them, and the erratic, drug and alcohol-influenced thought patterns that invaded her mind more easily than his. LaCroix led her to the small sound booth located in the rear of the club. As soon as the door thumped shut, the sounds from the revived nightclub were muted and more easily ignored.

"She'd hate this, LaCroix," Gabrielle said as she peered into the bar via a huge two-way

mirror.

"Janette's feelings are of little concern to me, Gabrielle." He said the words boldly, a buffer to the sharp stab of awareness he experienced each time he allowed himself to recall his favoured child's recent departure. He missed Janette. Restyling The Raven was a way of pretending he didn't. Gabrielle had immediately seen through his self-deception.

"She created The Raven, her accomplishment deserves more recognition and respect than this."

It was more statement than accusation or challenge, and LaCroix made no acknowledgement of the observation.

Gabrielle watched as a tall, voluptuous blonde stopped in front of the mirror to primp. She wore a transparent blouse and Gabrielle's teeth ground with irritation when the girl's hands rose and she pinched her nipples until they were erect and pressing against the film of her blouse. She had help with her task seconds later when a young man slithered up to stand behind her and began nuzzling her neck as he fondled her ample breasts.

"Damn it, LaCroix!"

She whirled and discovered he wasn't even looking at the pair in front of them. He did glance up when she growled in annoyance. His eyebrow arched and he shrugged one shoulder in absolute indifference.

"Why?" Gabrielle spit the word out as a demand.

"I don't particularly care what they do," he told her. "As long as they're paying, it doesn't matter."

"This doesn't bother you?" Gabrielle snarled.

LaCroix spared a look for the blonde and her companion, who were now pressed against the window, writhing rhythmically as the music thrummed a primal beat.

"Why should it? If these foolish mortals want to rut like animals, it's of no concern to me."

A shudder of distaste kissed her spine and she glared at his apathy. "Does their lust amuse you, mon amour, or excite you?"

LaCroix's eyebrow rose and his expression was guarded as he stared back at her.

Gabrielle turned away from the growing displeasure in his brilliant blue eyes. After long moments of tense silence, she sighed heavily and went to his side, drawn in spite of herself.

"I'm sorry," she whispered as her arms encircled his shoulders and she leaned down to kiss his temple. "I love you, LaCroix."

"Of course you do, pet," he murmured, his voice a sensual purr of satisfaction. Even when she hated him, she loved him more, and he knew it as surely as she herself did.

"Yes," she agreed in an ironic whisper, "of course I do. But do you never wonder if that will change?" she questioned.

LaCroix lifted her arms from his neck and drew her around to face him. He rose slowly and smiled as her head fell back to enable her to hold his gaze as he towered over her. She frequently wore high heels to compensate for the difference in their heights, but tonight she had no such advantage. His formidable presence was all too clearly defined by the subtle physical statement.

LaCroix raised a hand to trace the gentle slope of her cheek and she shivered almost imperceptibly at the light touch. He let the exploration drift lower, until his long fingers slid beneath the rich velvet of her jacket and smoothed over the delicate line of her collarbone. The jacket was moved aside and again he smiled before his head ducked toward her neck. Gabrielle's sharp hiss of breath pleased him when his tongue stroked leisurely at the erratic pulse near her throat.

Her entire body jerked toward him in a spasm of elation when his fangs sank into her neck. The electric shock of passion lit fire in her veins and she moaned against his shoulder as she clung to him. Gradually, a trickle of blood trailed downward as LaCroix drew back and she cried out when his tongue followed the scarlet track to the valley between her breasts.

"Lucien . . . " She shook her head in an effort to clear the fog of euphoria that had enveloped her. LaCroix ignored her protest and quickly lifted his head to cover her lips with his, the kiss deep and sensual with demand. Gabrielle's arms twined around his neck and she pressed her body against his with a hunger that equalled his wordless exigency.

When he finally pulled away from their kiss, LaCroix held her face between his hands. He smiled at the smouldering fire behind the smoky grey eyes that gazed adoringly at him.

"Their lust amuses me, Gabrielle," he said softly. "You excite me."

She'd forgotten the snide question she'd fired at him minutes earlier, and she bit her lip, chagrined at the idiocy of her words.

"If you didn't," he continued amiably, "I'd put you on the stage for them."

She laughed, the sound low and husky with still raging passion. "You wouldn't, Lucien," she stated assuredly. "You're too possessive, and your jealousy wouldn't permit anyone else to covet me."

"You're suddenly very secure, aren't you, ma bien-aimé?" he answered with a seductive smile.

"I will not relinquish the gift of your heart now that it's been given."

"And if I choose to take back what I have given?" he enquired with a raised eyebrow.

Gabrielle pulled him closer with a yank and grinned up at him.

"Don't even think it, my love," she warned with only partially feigned teasing. "Otherwise, we may have to re-evaluate the rules of **your** continued survival!"

LaCroix's eyes closed as she opened his shirt and pushed aside the high collar. With an oddly tender smile, he tilted his head back and ran his hands through the tangled, waist-length waves of her hair as her fangs sank gently into his neck. She drank in his essence, and LaCroix absorbed the constant mental flow of her absolute devotion to him. As long as Gabrielle lived, loneliness was a demon he would never be forced to confront. The more elusive emotion of happiness had finally found him, and LaCroix was content to hold it near, even cherish it.

BLEEDING INTO BLACK

(Sign off)

by: *Cyndi Bayless Overstreet*

Shame.

Erosion of the soul.

Freedom spawned from my eternal kiss,

Enchained by guilt's shackles.

Wings to fly -- clipped by pain.

Child of Darkness, blood of blood.

Fearfully and wonderfully made . . .

Legacy of power laid to waste.

Bleeding into the blackness of your soul.

Heed the Siren's call,

Whispers in the night -- beckoning, to heal love's

wounds with sweet surrender . . .

Gentle comes wisdom's eternal caress.

Struggle.

As you must.

Falter . . .

Wane . . .

Succumb.

Child of Darkness.

Spawn of mystic lore --

Rest gently in my world's embrace.

Wisdom of the ages, I grant.

My legacy and yours.

All I am -- and ever shall be,

A whisper on the wings of night, sent to soothe.

Accept, and know surrender's peace.

I bid you pleasant dreams and sweet au revoir.

***Margaret B. Lawlor
502 Shrader Street
San Francisco, CA
USA 94117-2714***

*As you can see from the cover of
A TOUCH OF FOREVER,
Bea is an artist of exceptional talent.
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honour of having one of her fabulous
portraits on my books.
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FOREVER KNIGHT CANADA.
Let us know if you're interested.*

The following is a brief listing of zines currently available, and those in progress, from **FOREVER KNIGHT CANADA**. *ALL zines available from FOREVER KNIGHT CANADA are discounted for Club Members. The FIRST listed price is the Member Rate, and the one following is the general purchase price. Prices are in Canadian Funds, U.S. orders use the same rate in U.S. Funds to cover the additional postage fees, International Rates are given with postage rates for AIR and SURFACE shipping.*

Cheques/money orders made payable to Tracy L. Essam.

THE FOREVER KNIGHT FAN DIRECTORY - Volume One

(Canada & U.S.) \$10.50 / \$12.50
(International) \$14.50 / \$16.50 (surface)
\$22.50 / \$24.50 (air)

THE FOREVER KNIGHT FAN DIRECTORY - Volume Two will be available Spring 1996.

THE FOREVER KNIGHT TRIVIA BOOK - Volume One

(Canada & U.S.) \$5.50 / \$6.50
(International) \$6.50 / \$7.50 (surface)
\$8.50 / \$9.50 (air)

THE FOREVER KNIGHT GAME BOOK - Volume One

(Canada & U.S.) \$7.50 / \$ 8.00
(International) \$8.50 / \$ 9.50 (surface)
\$9.50 / \$10.50 (air)

THE FOREVER KNIGHT Calendar

(Canada & U.S.) \$14.50 / \$15.50
(International) \$15.50 / \$16.50 (surface)
\$16.50 / \$17.50 (air)

FOREVER YOURS - Volume One

(Canada & U.S.) \$6.50 / \$7.50
(International) \$7.50 / \$8.50 (surface)
\$8.50 / \$9.50 (air)

FOREVER YOURS - Volume Two

(Canada & U.S.) \$ 8.50 / \$ 9.50
(International) \$ 9.50 / \$10.50 (surface)
\$10.50 / \$11.50 (air)

FOREVER YOURS - Volume Three

(Canada & U.S.) \$6.00 / \$6.50
(International) \$6.50 / \$7.00 (surface)
\$8.00 / \$9.00 (air)

FOREVER YOURS - Volume Four

(Canada & U.S.) \$10.50 / \$11.50
(International) \$12.00 / \$13.00 (surface)
\$15.50 / \$16.50 (air)

RESURRECTION

(Canada & U.S.) \$6.00 / \$6.50
(International) \$6.50 / \$7.00 (surface)
\$8.00 / \$9.00 (air)

DARK CONFESSIONS

(Canada & U.S.) \$7.50 / \$ 8.80
(International) \$8.50 / \$ 9.50 (surface)
\$9.50 / \$10.50 (air)

WAITING FOR ETERNITY

(Canada & U.S.) \$5.00 / \$5.50

(International) \$5.50 / \$6.50 (surface)
\$7.50 / \$8.50 (air)

THE LORDS OF DARK SECRETS

(Canada & U.S.) \$6.50 / \$7.50

(International) \$7.50 / \$8.50 (surface)
\$8.50 / \$9.50 (air)

UPCOMING 1995-96 FICTION ZINES:

ALL of the following zines are **CURRENTLY ACCEPTING SUBMISSIONS**, the tentative deadline for each zine is July 31st, 1996, unless otherwise noted. Also included is a brief description of the appropriate themes. The only unbreakable rule we have about submissions is that we do **NOT** accept slash ("/").

THE LORDS OF DARK OBSESSION is the second volume of the "Lords Of..." series, accepting all **original** vampire fiction.

MORE DARK CONFESSIONS continues the fascinating look at our vampires and their human friends, via interview style stories.

ENDLESS LOVE is to be a collection of love stories, the only requirement we have is that one of your lovers **must** be one of the vampires featured in **FOREVER KNIGHT**. The only "rule" you need remember is that if vampires and mortals mate, either two vampires get out of bed the next evening, or one of your lovers is dead! Available March '96

WHAT EVER HAPPENED TO ... any of the characters we've met in the various episodes? If you have ideas, here's the place to send 'em!

IMPOSSIBLE KNIGHT is the zine where all the things that could never be seen on screen can now be brought to life. If it's not possible because of the **FOREVER KNIGHT** story bible, then it belongs here. No normal story will be accepted!

FOREVER YOURS - Volume Five is looking for general **FOREVER KNIGHT** fiction, tastefully presented adult material is accepted, just remember it shouldn't be graphic or gratuitous, nor should the violence Available March '96

IF THE WALLS COULD TALK! is a **FOREVER KNIGHT** funzine. The idea is to tell the story through the imaginary "eyes" of an inanimate object. Keep in mind, because the object is inanimate, your story must revolve around the immediate area in which the object is.

HOT-BLOODED is an "adult" zine, devoted to the erotic and sensual allure of each of our characters. Because of the nature of this zine, there will be scenes of explicit sex and/or graphic violence. * *An age statement may be requested prior to purchase.* *

THE MUSIC OF THE KNIGHT will feature the complement of music as an integral part of each story told. If you've ever heard a song that is perfect to describe a mood or help tell a story, then we want to include both in this collection!

HOLIDAY KNIGHTS All stories in this collection must be set during the festivities of a recognised holiday, such as Christmas, Halloween, etc., and must involve at least one of our central characters. Stories set in any time are welcome.

SERIES ZINES:

Each issue of our series will be devoted to an individual character of the **FOREVER KNIGHT** universe. What makes these different is the object of the stories: to give new insight into the minds, hearts, and souls of each of the people being explored.

ONCE UPON A KNIGHT (formerly HISTORY KNIGHT) An eight-zine series, with each issue covering a different century of Nick's life. The stories do not have to revolve around Nick, but they must remain in the time frame of 1200 -- 1990. Current timeline stories should be sent to one of the other zines Deadline for series zines: May 31st, 1996

THE FOREVER KNIGHT COOKBOOK is everything you need to have on hand in the kitchen for those nights when you have a guest with "exotic" tastes to feed. Filled with recipes of things mentioned on the show, as well as a special section on "blood" foods for the discriminating vampire palette!

WHOM GODS HAVE FAVOURED is to be an exploration of LaCroix's life, all 2000 years of it. The volume begins with a proposed background which led to the events in "A More Permanent Hell", and will progress through history with a series of tales that trace the vast lifespan of Nick Knight's Dark Master Summer 1996

FOREVER UNDECIDED is an irreverent collection of humour based on the idea of Nick achieving his goal of regaining his mortality, and discovering it's not all he thought it would be! (Tentative) Summer 1996

ALTERNATE BEGINNINGS will be just as the name implies, a series of stories that present alternate origins for Nick's "father", LaCroix Tentative publication Autumn/Winter 1996

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We are IBM compatible, use MS WORKS, and can read WordPerfect, Windows Write, or ASCII. Submissions on disc are preferred, if you can manage it -- if not, that's okay too. Both 3.5" and 5.25" discs (DD or HD) are acceptable. (Disc submissions, please write your name and address on the label, as well as the name of the Software Programme used.)

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FOREVER KNIGHT CANADA
Tracy L. Essam
302 Roselawn Avenue
Toronto, Ontario
Canada M4R 1G1

SASE w/\$1 for a complete, detailed catalogue, and membership information.

